

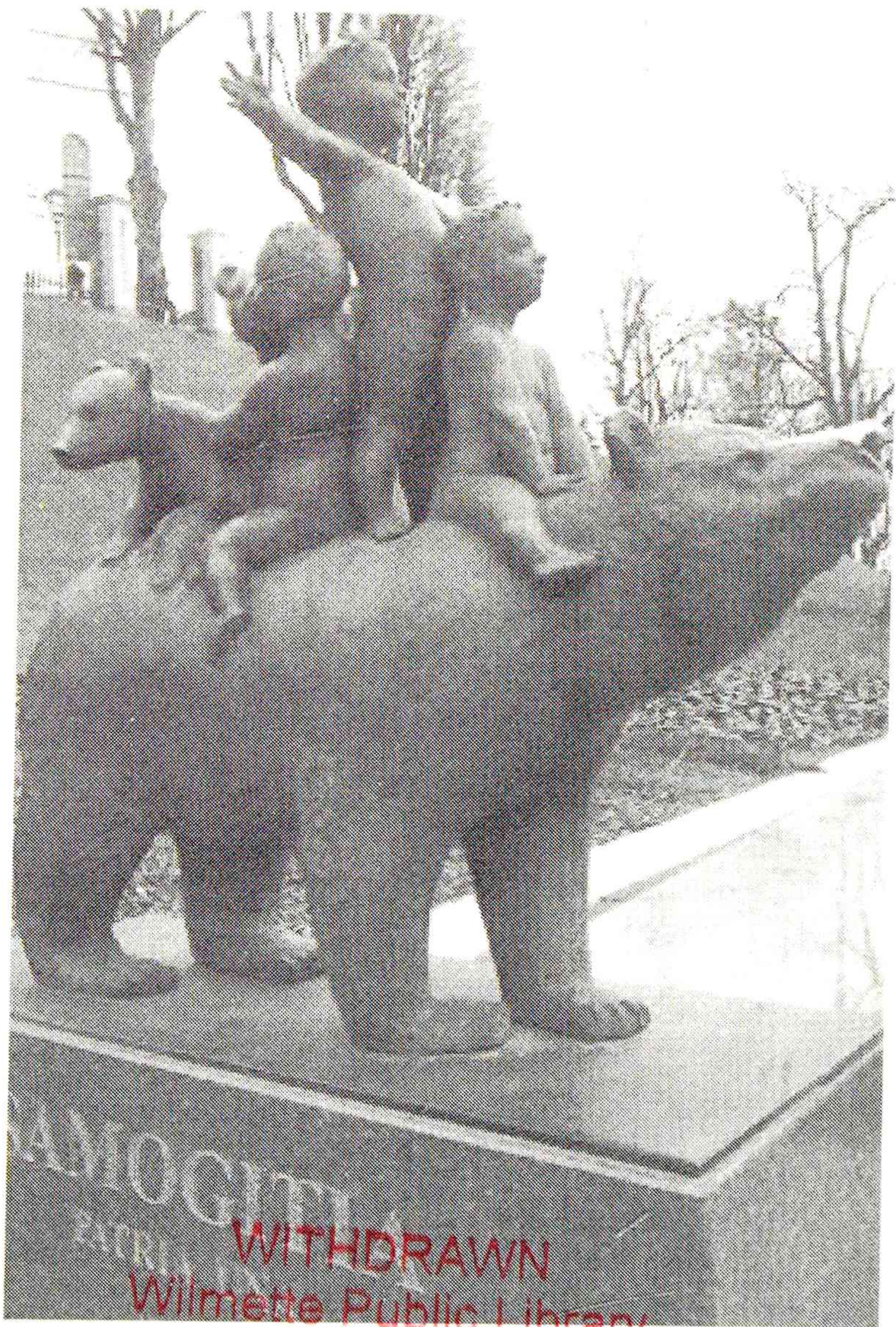


SAMOGITIA MEA PATRIA

LEO L. ALGMINAS

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Autobiographical Remembrances
by Leo L. Algminas



WITHDRAWN
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Samogitia Mea Patria

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Title page photo of *Samogitian Legends* monument

by Rolandas Meskauskas

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Prolog

My story begins near the end of the historical novel *The Crimson Blight*. The novel is a true depiction of events taking place in Lithuania during the first Soviet occupation in 1940–1941. In that novel two boys run in to Vydeika's yard and give him a message from a man locked in a freight car in the train station in Telsiai. The message is: "Bring food for the children..."

I was the younger of the two boys with the message. The time was June 1941 and the events leading up to that moment were consequential not only to our family, but also our country and indeed the entire planet. Let the historians tell you why and how two totalitarian regimes in Europe had divided Europe between them. Lithuania was on the receiving end by the Soviet Union and it had sent in its Red Army to occupy us the year before. Stalin was its undisputed Russian leader and his followers called him "Father," "The Sun," "Leader of the Proletariat" and otherwise described him with every shining superlative a depraved brain could conjure up.

Two years before, Hitler, the pompous and strutting German leader with a funny moustache, had chased us out of our home in Klaipeda. (Here is an old fact: Stalin was not Russian; Hitler was not German). My brother and I were born in Klaipeda, Lithuania, and our parents had married and made their home there. One day in 1939 we were told to pack

up and get out. Just like that. Defying that order was out of the question, strong rumors of concentration camps in Germany were reinforced almost daily by Jews who had found refuge outside Germany's borders. Our immediate family, along with my mother's sister Antanina, moved to Telsiai, in Samogitian Lithuania, and found a home with my father's sister, Vincenta.

The Soviets had already extended their empire into every corner of Europe wherever they found fertile ground for their godless ideology through their surrogates, the Communists. Lithuanians were also in that group, consisting of the ne'er-do-wells, the so-called intellectuals who wanted to transform society into their utopic image and the usual opportunists who would join anyone in power. The labor union leaders were some of the first to grab and wave the red flag. These misfits formed a new government and immediately passed out decrees scoffing at religion, disbanding the scout movement and most other national organizations and replacing them with their Pioneers and Com-Youth, young communists. All their orders came from Moscow.

Religion was dropped from the curriculum in all Lithuanian schools. Propaganda posters were everywhere, extolling Communism and the liberation of workers brought to you by the "Father," "Teacher," J. Stalin.

The Soviet occupation had a number of immediate and negative ramifications. It was not long before consumer goods of all types started to disappear from store shelves. Certain food items also became scarce, such as coffee, tea and almost everything else that had been imported. Lithuania was always more than self-sufficient in basic foodstuffs, such as grain, meat, milk products, potatoes and sugar, but the added burden of feeding thousands of troops and their hungry dependents, some who probably had not eaten a decent meal

in years, started to leave its mark. It was also not a well-kept secret that the Lithuanian food warehouses were being stripped and shipped east, to the “workers’ paradise.”

Persecutions of Lithuanians who had been named as enemies of the people started almost immediately. Some of the former government officials, especially those who had been vocally anti-communist, were the first to be arrested. Pro-democracy writers, university professors and teachers were next. It was not long before the larger landowners and farmers were declared exploiters of the working class and were evicted from their property, jailed and later deported to Siberia. So-called land reform was enacted and farms were sub-divided with parcels handed out to the “landless,” regardless if they were capable or knew how to manage and farm the land. Business and private property became the property of the state, and the economy of the country turned into a shambles.

The incident described in *The Crimson Blight*, of the two boys carrying the dreadful message that the children on the train were hungry, was the second and larger wave of deportations that year. This one was massive and included families who had nothing to do with politics. Former police and army officers, teachers, priests, lawyers and almost everyone who was educated and demonstrated patriotic feelings about Lithuania was singled out for a one-way train trip east. The other two Baltic nations experienced similar trauma at the same time. This was a planned genocide by a criminal (he had robbed banks), and the most vicious murderer of this or every other century in the history of mankind, Joseph V. Stalin, and executed by Russian army and security service NKVD (later re-named KGB). The imminent war with Germany interrupted this genocide. However, it was only postponed, and was to be resumed after the war. By then we were very far away.

Chapter 1

War Is The Answer

My brother Arutis (real name Arvydas) and I knew the street. We found Vydeika and told him of the freight cars full of people at the Telsiai train station. The way it happened, my brother, who was almost two years older than me and was always in motion, just had to know what was going on at all times everywhere. My mission in life was to follow him to find out what he was up to. That June morning he had noticed several covered trucks driven by Russian soldiers heading toward the railroad station. He ran after them, and I somehow managed to keep him in sight. Out of breath, I caught up with him at the station and we saw the last of the army trucks unload half-dressed people, crying and struggling families with children, soldiers pushing and shoving them into the freight cars and latching the doors. Before the last door could be slammed shut, a man inside, wearing some kind of uniform jacket and only underpants yelled at us: “Boys, if you are free run to Vagariu Street to Vydeikas and ask them to bring food for the children.”

The Russian soldiers guarding the freight cars were not the friendly faces we kids had encountered on the city streets in the past. Idle soldiers, singly or in groups, always

attracted boys who followed and pestered them for souvenirs, especially those little red stars from their caps. “*Daitie minie zvezduska*,” were practically the first words we had learned in Russian. (The actual first words we learned brought on the promise of a severe punishment from our father if we were to repeat them again. How could we know that the Russians had no respect for mothers?)

“Give me your little star,” almost always followed with the soldier taking off his garrison cap, unclipping the Soviet insignia and handing over the prize. The troopers guarding the train, with their belted blouses and loose boots and carrying their long rifles with bayonets at their tips, looked more likely to kick our butts than to hand out insignia. Mindful of the message to Vydeika, we ran from the station as fast as our bare feet would carry us. From Vydeika’s house, after we delivered the message, it was not a very long walk home. My brother and I noticed the empty streets and wondered if the events at the rail station were the cause for the streets to be so deserted.

At home I told of our little adventure to our mother, with Arutis giving me the fish eye. We received the usual scolding for venturing out of our neighborhood and I was thankful that our father was preoccupied elsewhere. It was not long however, before he was home, having visited neighbors and friends who already knew of the rampage by the Bolsheviks. Clearly upset, he wasted no time listening to our mother repeat our morning’s adventure.

“Pack bundles of clothing and whatever food we can carry,” he instructed us. “There is no time to lose and we need to be out of our house now! I will explain later, but for now they must not find us here when they come.”

We already knew who “they” were. Taking side streets and alleys, we made our way out of the city on foot. Heading toward Tausalas Lake, we ended up in the woods, in

an old caretaker's shelter consisting of a lean-to with a leaky roof. Fortunately there was no rain and it became our home for the rest of the day. Father left us in the care of nature, which in the month of June can be most generous with warm sun until late in the evening, birds singing in the trees, they in turn whispering their secrets with their tops in the gentle breeze.

A farmer, an old friend of our family whom our father had visited earlier in the afternoon, promised shelter for us for the night, but for everyone's safety we needed to be back in the woods at daybreak. We walked to the farm before sunset and had supper of sour milk and boiled potatoes, sitting outside at a rough wooden table and long benches.

"This is situation will soon be resolved. There is no doubt that the Germans will invade and kick the communists out and we will be able to go home again."

My brother and I heard these words while pretending to be asleep in the hayloft. The adults had continued sitting on the benches in the yard, talking, taking advantage of the fine weather. As long as there was any daylight remaining, the swallows darted back and forth over the yard keeping the mosquitos in check. Recent events in the city dominated the adults' conversation. Our father continued: "For whatever reason, and I will be grateful to him for the rest of my life, an official whom I cannot name informed me that our family was on the list to be deported." He sighed and added: "We were running out of time and if it not for his warning we would now be sitting in a cattle car on rails to God knows where."

It was not long before the rustling of the freshly-cut and sun-dried hay under our backs, the smell of clover and summer's night air lulled me to sleep.

The next day, after our breakfast of fresh milk and bread, we slung our bundles and trundled back in to the

woods. Tausalas Lake shimmered in the distance between the trees. We knew the Soviet army had garrisoned near its southern shore last year. We had no way of knowing if any of them remained and we took no chances of being seen out in the open. Arutis whispered: "Boy, would I like to go for a swim there right now."

The lake's surface was smooth and flat. "I bet that the water is like a bath this morning."

We knew from experience that several long cloudless days of June, which had preceded this morning, had warmed the water and made it perfect for a dip and a swim. It was not to be, however, for our fear of being discovered drove us back to the shelter in the woods.

With one exception our refuge among the trees upon moss-covered ground would have been a pleasant experience. The weather was perfect, we had plenty of food and the farmer had supplied us with milk. The mosquitoes, however, were the devil's own torture. They were relentless, finding open skin and drawing blood. By the end of the day our bare legs were covered with welts and bleeding from the scratches we had inflicted on ourselves in our discomfort.

"Did you hear that?" My father rose up from the fallen pine tree and looked up to the sky. "I think I hear an airplane."

We stopped scratching and listened, turning our heads to the West. We heard the distant buzzing of an engine, the sound drifting in and out, but the trees prevented us from seeing anything beyond the immediate top of the sky. It was mid-afternoon and somewhere in the distance we heard explosions. They were far away but it was an unmistakable sound.

"Bombs!" my father shouted. He knew the sound because he had fought in the war for Lithuania's independence in 1918. "Boys, the war is starting! This is what

we are waiting for; this is what will chase that malignant red horde off our land!”

I did not know the word “malignant” but I had no doubt what he meant. My brother and I shared his excitement while our mother sat with a frightened look on her face. She also believed that war between Communism and National Socialism would be our immediate salvation, but she was also aware from experience the hazards of war to civilians, to normal life and the probable upheaval to the smaller nations caught up in armed conflicts. She also knew that her husband would not remain in the forest with us much longer. His nervous pacing made it clear that he felt the need to be closer to the action in the city.

“I will be back before dark to walk you to the farm, but first I need to see if our house still stands and the red thieves have not broken in.”

Holding on to a hickory staff he had carved for himself during the morning and waving to us, he was gone. True to his word he was back before dark, just past eight o’clock by his pocket watch.

“The Red Army and its boot lickers in the city are panicking and packing,” he told us as we were walking toward the farm. “It is no longer a matter of days, but hours before they are gone. To be on the safe side we must hide for a little longer. We will be safe on the farm at night, and I don’t expect anyone will have the time or the inclination to look for us during the day. Some of my friends are arming themselves and I expect to do the same,” he rationalized, “there will be a need for armed men to protect the government offices and guard against strays who are out of luck catching the last truck back to their workers’ paradise.”

Soon, the farmhouse appeared at the edge of the woods with a welcoming glow. There was the well with its sweep, the barn stood next to it, which would be my

bedroom for another short summer night. We grabbed a chunk of homemade soap and towels and ran to the lake several hundred meters from the house. There was just enough twilight left for us to scrub the mosquito bites on our bodies. The lake's water seemed like a cool, soothing velvet wrap around our naked bodies. The sky began to fill with stars as we were sauntering back to the farmhouse. Somehow we felt that tomorrow things would be better, that something extraordinary was in the air.

The following day, June 22, the wind had shifted. Father had left first thing in the morning and headed to Telsiai while we went back into the woods. All day we could hear the distant rumble of trucks on the East-West highway. We could not tell in which direction they were moving but to us it signaled the continuing presence of the Red Army. My mother, my brother and I stayed hidden in the woods for most of the day. Late in the afternoon we heard footsteps and there was our father, with a rifle in his hands and a big smile on his face.

“The red bastards are gone!” he exclaimed, raising his rifle high in the air and forgetting that children were present. “Practically without firing a shot at the Germans, the ‘invincible’ Red Army is only dust on the road blowing east. Gather up your belongings, we are going home!”

Chapter 2

Home Again

After the few days in the woods and out in nature, to me the city seemed different. It was different! There was broken glass in the streets, busted doors hanging by a single hinge. Some houses had all their windows broken. We had seen that the day before yesterday on our way home from the woods. Today we were restricted to our yard, wishing some of our friends would come by. This was after a stern admonishment from our mother for us to stay in our own yard and never to pick up strange objects that we might find anywhere.

She stressed this last remark and repeated it again and we darn well knew she was talking about last night's incident when Arutis walked into the kitchen and said: "Look what I found!" He raised his left hand and there was a ring hooked to his thumb from which a round, fairly heavy-looking object was dangling. Our father took one look and turned deathly pale.

"Don't move!" he yelled, "don't even twitch," he repeated. He jumped up and grabbed my brother's arm. Slowly he removed the object from his finger and without another word left the house.

"Where did you find it?" our mother asked, also

shaken because she suspected, and it was later confirmed, that Arutis had brought a hand grenade into our house.

“I didn’t do anything,” my brother whined, expecting punishment, but not knowing for what. “There is lots of stuff out there by the field house. We followed other kids who said that the Reds had rushed off in a real hurry and left a bunch of stuff.”

After a while our father returned. The adults had secured the area around the field house, which for the past year had been the Soviet army’s supply warehouse. Broken small arms ammunition boxes had been discovered on the grounds as well as other military paraphernalia. The weapons were gone and the anticipated punishment Arutis expected never materialized. Instead we received a lengthy lecture on not touching things we knew nothing about. Our father told us: “Had you pulled out the pin with that ring on your thumb you and everybody near you would have been killed!”

We heard his words but our young imaginations could not grasp our deaths. That only happened to soldiers in battle and old people, but the look on his and our mother’s faces as he said that left a deep impression. In the days to come we would become more intimately acquainted with the concept of eternity.

He also talked to us of difficult days ahead not only for our family, but for the entire city and our country. The conversation turned to adult matters. “The Jews in Telsiai and probably elsewhere are being rounded up by the German army with the help of some of our own people and are being held as prisoners,” he told us. “Jews had promoted communism, siding with Stalin to overturn the Lithuanian government and inviting and welcoming the Soviet army. Because of that there were brutal mass deportations of Lithuanians and the confiscation of land and businesses from their rightful owners, and Jews are being blamed.”

“Rumors from Germany on the fate of the Jews there do not bode well for anyone with human compassion,” our mother added. “The news from Germany, however,” said our mother who spoke German and listened to their radio broadcasts, “was of overwhelming victories by the German armed forces on the Eastern front, huge advances toward Moscow and of thousands of prisoners being taken on a daily basis...”

Arutis and I had heard enough and we left the house. Free from school and confined to our yard, my brother and I spent our time contemplated arming ourselves. Back in the woods we had scouted out forked branches of the right size, mostly of hickory wood, for slingshots, cut them down and trimmed the bark. Our problem was rubber. We had none and there was no one around to barter with. The best material was bicycle inner tubes cut into strips but our father’s bike’s spares were definitely off limits. We were stymied.

Several boys my brother’s age were passing by our house. They were bouncing a large rubber ball on our street and seeing my brother Antanas yelled: “Look what we found,” pointing to the ball, “The Russians must have left it. We are going to the seminary’s basketball court to shoot some baskets, want to come with us?”

Antanas was about the same age as my brother and lived a few doors away. I had seen the other boys before but I did not know their names. They also were older than me, but not by much.

The court he was talking about was practically across the street from our house. It had two regulation baskets mounted on backboards facing each other at a distance for a normal game on a dirt and beaten-down grass rectangle, which sat at the bottom of the seminary hill. It had been put up for the seminary students for their recreation. The court

was closed off with a tall wooden fence from the street and accessible only from the seminary grounds from the top. We knew where there was a loose board and getting onto the court was not a problem. As much as we liked to shoot baskets, other problems had kept us away. For almost the entire past year the Soviet army had occupied the seminary and the basketball court was used for their bayonet practice.

“*Na shtiki!*” their sergeant would yell and the soldiers would take a step forward and thrust their bayoneted rifles into straw men. We had watched them through cracks and knotholes in the wooden fence. To see them destroy the straw men was almost as much fun as seeing the seminarians in the past, their long, floor-length black cassocks sweeping the dirt, running, dribbling and shooting baskets.

Our other obstacle was that none of us had a regular basketball. One of the older boys, much older, maybe 15, had one and before the Russians took possession of the dirt court he would bring his friends and play. The only time he would even let us touch the ball was when someone would toss it accidentally out of bounds into the weeds and we would run after it and hand it back to them.

“Mom, can we go across the street and play basketball?” My brother yelled running into the house. “Antanas has a ball and needs more kids for a team.” “Please, can we go? Please...”

She knew we would not stop pestering her and did not think we could get into much mischief on the basketball court. She knew who the other kids were and she also knew their parents. “As long as you don’t go anywhere else and come home when I call you, go and play. And no fighting!”

We dashed across the street, helped peel back the loose board from the fence and were on the court before our mother could close the door.

“Let’s see the ball, Onte!” That is what we called

Antanas. He tossed the ball to my brother. It had enough bounce for some clumsy dribbling and seemed to be almost the right size. Arutis and Antanas chose up sides and as usual I was picked last, probably because I was the youngest and the smallest. (Not probably, for sure). There was no net on the hoops; we used only one basket and we argued about the rules almost as much as we played. There weren't that many points scored either but we argued about them as well.

Our game was broken up when the older boys with the real ball showed up and pushed us off to the other end of the court where the ground was uneven. The ball bounced at odd angles and made it difficult to dribble. We were beginning to get bored with the game anyway and ended it with no clear winner.

We sat on the hillside and told stories of our unexpected stay in the woods during the past few days. Arutis said to Antanas: "Do you know that hickory wood makes the best slingshot fork? We cut some to size when we were in the woods and they are perfect. If only we could find some rubber, we would be all set!"

Antanas scratched his head and said: "This ball was not the only thing we found yesterday. There were these strange looking things with glass eye holes and snouts. You could stick your whole head in them and keep them on with straps and buckles; they feel like they are made of rubber."

"Did you bring any home?" Arutis asked. "I want to see them and if we can't use them for slingshots they could be fun to scare the girls."

Antanas wasted no time in busting through the loose board in the fence and ran home. He had stashed the mystery bundle under the veranda in front of his house. Making sure no one saw him, he retrieved the contraption, wrapped his arms around it and made his way back to the basketball court.

We were all waiting to see the mystery thing.

He tossed it on the side of the hill next to us. With much shouting we scrambled to see it. My brother was the first to grasp it and he lifted it high in the air. One of the older boys who had been shooting baskets looked up and said: "Look, the kids found themselves a gas mask!"

So that's what Antanas had brought back. Our parents and their friends had talked about poison gas having been used in the last war and how devastating that had been. According to our father, all armies were now equipped with gas masks and each soldier was issued his own for training and for use in the event the enemy released poison gas during a battle. Since several different gases had caused so many casualties, everyone was convinced that, because it was so deadly, it would be used again in the next war. Gas masks had become a part of every soldier's uniform, as much his rifle and his ammunition belt. Soldiers in a hurry the other day must have discarded them as extra weight and Antanas stumbled on to them.

Antanas wrestled the mask back from my brother. In their tussle, it was easy to see that it had a lot of stretch and give in it and my brother asked around who had a pocket knife. One was quickly produced and Antanas cut some strips from the part that was designed to cover the side of the face. A quick test of stretching the strip looked promising.

"Go get the forks you were bragging about," Antanas said to my brother. "And while you are at it, see if you can find some string and any kind of leather."

Arutis did not like to be ordered about so he turned to me and said: "You heard what Onte said. Go get the stuff and do it fast. Tell Mom we are alright and not to worry. We should be home soon and she will help you find the string."

Finding the forks was easy because I knew where I had put them. The string was more difficult because my

mother kept asking all kinds of questions about why we needed it and what we were going to do with it. I hated to lie and was glad she finally gave in after I told her we had to tie up some stuff. The leather was impossible so I just carried what I had.

A piece of fairly thick canvas was located instead. It was cut to size and our first slingshot was soon complete. Antanas was the first to try it out and pronounced it good. Arutis was next and chose a larger pebble and a crow in a tree about 25 meters away for a target. The pebble fell way short and the crow did not even bother to look up.

“Not enough tension in the rubber,” he pronounced. “Too soft and already looks like it will break.”

I had been looking at what was left of the gas mask. The edges of the rubber face had been doubled over and glued together and they were just about the right width for the slingshot. Carefully, so as not to put any nicks in them, I cut the edges into strips and handed them to Antanas. “Try these,” I said to him. The new slingshot looked sturdier. Another crow was spotted as a target and with a screech it took off as the little stone crashed into the branch it was perched on. From now on the crows would show us respect. We had discovered a new and improved material for our slingshots. The hunt for gas masks was on!

Chapter 3

The Martyrs

Two days after our successful slingshot production, I walked into the kitchen to get some breakfast. Both of my aunts and my mother were listening to my father talking, who fell silent as I walked in. All three women were in tears, my father's sister, Aunt Vincenta, was slumped over, her face hidden in her hands.

“What's the matter?” I asked my mother, who was looking at me as if her heart would break. It was clear to me that someone must have died. My mother pulled me over and hugged me tightly. She said: “Your father was just telling us about a number of dead bodies that were found in the woods near the city. There are at least 50 or 60 and perhaps more, because the digging is still going on. What your father did not want you to hear was that most of these bodies had been cut up, skin peeled off, stabbed and burned and it is now difficult to identify them.”

“Why would anyone stab, burn and cut dead bodies?” I asked her.

“Oh my God, how can I tell you this – they were not dead when this was done...”

“Who...?” I said.

My father spoke up. “We are pretty sure they are the prisoners who were in jail and were moved out just hours before the Germans...”

“No.” I said. “Who would do such things to other live people?” I was imagining the pain of being stabbed and especially burned, because just having been singed on my fingers by a live coal had hurt so much.

“Evil exists in this world,” my mother spoke through tears. “When you are told time after time that there is no God, there is no hell, when you are told you should kill those who are enemies and exploiters of the working people and others who refuse to recognize and appreciate the ‘liberation and joy’ that Stalin has brought to us, you can no longer know what is right and what is not. You can then do evil things because there is no God to punish you.”

I was no longer hungry. I left the kitchen with the wailing women. My father looked stricken, something I had never seen before. My brother was already outside digging in the garden for suitable stones for his slingshot and packing them into his short pants’ pockets. There were engine sounds not far away. Arutis said: “The Prussians (that was our name for the Germans) are passing through the marketplace. I am going to watch.” That was his way of asking if I wanted to come without coming out and asking. I did not say anything and just followed him.

The main street in Telsiai runs into and through the market square, which really is not square, it’s almost round. On the opposite end where the Great Street (*Didžioji gatvė*) runs into the market, there stands the parish church, fenced in from all sides with stone and iron pickets. A gate on the paved path leads into the main entrance of the church. At the opposite, east end of the church grounds, a large stone pedestal supports a cannon dating back to the Swedish invasion in the seventeenth century.

The church and the cannon sit on a hill, which offers a panoramic view of the fields and woods in the distance. The cannon points east, toward Russia. Kids big and small spent a lot of time riding the huge barrel like a horse and pretending to blast the enemies attacking from below.

German army trucks and staff cars blasted through the market square. Skirting the church, the vehicles continued east and their destination, according to all propaganda, was Moscow.

My brother and I were unable to get a good look at them. We saw their grey field uniforms and there was no mistaking their steel helmets, but we were more interested in their weapons. From what little we could see, the Germans had more automatic weapons than the Russians who had occupied Telsiai. Their officers were easy to spot by their silver epaulets and to a man they carried submachine guns. Large machine guns were mounted on their trucks pointing in the air. Almost all the trucks were pulling trailers or cannons and to our big disappointment none of them stopped or even slowed down.

The Germans had kicked our family out of Klaipeda two years before. Klaipeda, now called Memel by the Germans, had been our home. My brother and I were born there. According to our mother, Hitler was determined to rule Europe and would grab all lands where any German language had ever been spoken by some of the people.

Klaipeda had followed Sudetenland, Austria, before that and I was too little to remember much about our move to Telsiai. One day the Germans were there – no war, practically no protest, they just appeared and took over. They told us to get out and at least we could take our belongings with us. I do remember the German army marching in the streets in preparation of Hitler's visit. Nazi banners were everywhere, and Hitler's visit was a great holiday for the

German population.

Their army looked different then, greener than the grey we were seeing now, but maybe back then it was the flags flying and the bands playing that made them look different. Perhaps for that reason, had they stopped and jumped out of the trucks, I doubt if I would have approached them the way we had approached the Russians. Even just sitting in trucks and cars, they looked all business with no time for frivolity.

My thoughts were confirmed a day or two later when several staff cars stopped to examine an abandoned Russian tank on the other side of the city. A guard was posted to keep everyone else away and the Germans jumped in and out of the turret laughing, snapped some pictures posing next to the cannon barrel and in no time they were back in their *Kuebelwagen* and were gone.

Our German army watching was not very productive on that day. Their convoys were infrequent and too fast for a good look. We were headed for home when we noticed groups of people, young and old, some with flowers in their hands, walking through the market place, in the direction of the highway leading out of the city. My brother recognized a family among them. He asked the lady: "Where are you going and what is going on?"

"Rainiai woods, some of the relatives of the martyrs are already there. We wish to pay respects to those whom we know and we heard that there will be a religious service."

Arutis said to me: "I'm going too. I want to see the bodies."

"You heard what our mother told us. We were not to leave the neighborhood." I said, not so much out of fear for punishment for disobeying, but because dead bodies frightened me and I did not want to go.

Once his mind was made up to do something, he was

going to do it no matter what. Mother's admonishments or possible punishment by our father did not stop him.

Stubborn, they called him and that came to my mind when he took off on a direction away from home. I did not follow him but I did not want to go home and face questions about Arutis. I walked up hill toward the cathedral, up the steps, past the Bishop's mansion and toward the soccer field, hoping to see someone playing. The field was empty. I found a bench and sat down and thought about the bodies found in Rainiai Woods.

As my father had said, the bodies had to be the people who had been jailed. "They were not criminals but people who in some way had offended the new order."

My mother had spoken those words soon after some students had failed to come home from school and had been taken to jail. This was a few weeks ago and by then the jail in the city was full. Among the prisoners were several farmers and business people, former government workers and teachers. To hear the communists talk, they all were class enemies, exploiters of the working people and anti-revolutionists who had spoken against Stalin.

"Who is this Stalin?" I said to myself. "His pictures are everywhere and you cannot escape hearing his name on the loudspeakers in the streets. Has he replaced Jesus, the son of God, and had the new order elevated Stalin in his place?" I looked at the magnificent cathedral above me.

"That must be it, because they didn't want us to go to church, didn't want us to pray and they are even saying that there is no God. Speaking badly of God is a sin. Confessing the sin you are forgiven in God's eyes. Speaking badly about Stalin must be a crime and you are taken to jail and there was no forgiveness."

From a very early age we were taught catechism and prayers. I remember clearly the day my father handed me a

one Litas coin for having recited the Lord's Prayer from memory; he was proud of me and I could memorize things easily. We knew of Mary, mother of Jesus, and we had her picture in our bedroom. She was such a pretty lady! It was easy to pray looking at her. We knew of the Twelve Apostles also from a picture in our dining area, it was called *The Last Supper*, painted by some old Italian artist.

Stalin, the new deity we were instructed to worship, also had apostles, but in a word they were ugly. There was Lenin, with a bearded chin stuck out so far he could plow a furrow in a rocky soil with it. Molotov and Beria were no better. I knew their names and faces because you could not avoid seeing the placards in the streets on billboards. There were others whose names I did not know, but one with a massive beard was positively scary. Father of Socialism, they called him and he was not a Russian. I needed to ask somebody how I could get out of memorizing the new catechism by Marx.

"Jesus had died on a cross to free us from sin, Stalin lives to free us from butter and bread," my father had said soon after the Red Army settled in our city and the stores began to close because they had nothing to sell. To me Stalin was the funny looking old guy who appeared to be inhaling a black bird up his nose. I had never seen a mustache like that. It is a good thing no one heard us talking; or maybe someone had and that is why we were on the list for deportation.

The time flew by while I had been sitting and thinking. I was getting hungry and the day was becoming noticeably cooler. Time to go home!

My brother was walking in the door at the same time. He had a strange look on his face; I asked him if he had seen the bodies. "I saw them." He walked into the house and seeing our mother he began to cry. "Mom, they are shooting people," he said. "When I got to Rainiai woods there were a

lot of people. Some were crying, others praying on their knees and in front of them there were many dead bodies wrapped in linen cloth. In another part of the woods soldiers were guarding men, somebody said they were Jews, who were washing more bodies. Some of the mourners cursed them and shouted that they had brought this upon themselves for bringing communism here. Later I heard shots and people said that when they finished washing the bodies the Jews were forced to walk further into the woods and then were shot." My mother hugged Arutis and also began to cry. "I told you not to leave the neighborhood," she repeated over and over again...

Chapter 4

The Funeral

Many of the martyrs were fairly well-known people in the city. Some of them had been arrested weeks before their murder and had languished in jail on only verbal charges that they were exploiters of the working class and enemy of the people. From the information that had been seeping in from Russia ever since the revolution, “enemies of the people” could not expect much mercy and the best they could hope for was a trip to forced labor camp somewhere in the far North. The fact that middle school students were among them, and were brutally massacred, caused additional anger and rage among the citizens of Telsiai and later the entire country when the word had spread through towns and cities nationwide.

Seventy-three bodies were recovered in Rainiai Woods. The grief of their parents, relatives and friends was beyond words. Both Catholic churches in the city were filled with mourners. Special masses were conducted to accommodate the grieving citizens. A mass funeral was planned, and would be held later that week.

The day before the scheduled funeral our family had just finished supper and the talk once again turned to the

massacre. My father said: “We have a good idea as to who were the participants in this atrocity. The NKVD officer who took charge of the jail after the real warden was exiled was seen entering the jail on that day. His name will be somewhere on record and Russia will not be big enough to hide him. Some of the guards must have also participated. We know one other fact, the murderers had been drinking; empty bottles were found at the scene.”

“What about those responsible for the arrests in the first place, the snitches and the bootlickers who were too ready to point fingers and testify in order to prove their allegiance to the communists?” asked my mother.

“Some managed to run away, others are hiding. It is probably not for the best if they are found at this time because many people might wish to take matters into their own hands,” said my father. “When and if things get back to normal these people will face trial and we need to make certain that they are judged fairly. It would be impossible to do this now.”

As usual my mother took a wider view of the past events: “Who will judge the monsters that created this murderous system?” she asked of no one in particular. “By what right do they invade and take over from a legitimate government, enforce their own rules, tell people to deny God and twist children’s minds to spy on their parents? Where do their enablers come from? First, to believe their lies and then to do their dirty work?”

When everyone was quiet my mother answered her own question: “Too many are ready to believe their lies because these lies are wrapped in high-sounding slogans. Freedom from exploitation, distribution of wealth, workers owning the means of production, it all sounds great until reality sets in. There is no one exploited more than the forced laborers in the mines and the forests of Siberia. Owning the

means of production also brings responsibilities that require knowledge and skill, be it in the factories or on the farms. Central planning by ignoramuses is destroying the economy. We saw that ourselves after the so-called land reform right here. Now my concern is if the National Socialism is any different; socialism, communism, same social engineering by a different name...”

We went to bed on that note. Much had been said that I did not understand. I knew that something awful had taken place and had disrupted our lives; would things ever be normal again...

The warm summer days made it urgent that the funeral be held as soon as possible. That morning people had come from all corners of Samogitia to pay their last respects to their friends, relatives and fellow citizens. Coffins had been delivered to Rainiai Woods; horses and wagons volunteered by farmers and others stood at the roadside waiting for the bodies of martyrs to be transported to the cemetery in Telsiai.

After a mass at a makeshift wooden cross near the site of the massacre, the priests in their holiday vestments gathered to lead the procession. Behind them people from various organizations had raised their banners and flags. There was Sauliai the military veteran reserve organization. Immediately behind them were scouts in their uniforms and neck scarves, their colors denoting the level and age of membership. Various religious organizations were well represented and were proud to show their colors once again, after having been disbanded by the communist regime. Behind them, all along the roadside, stood mourners and other people, young and old, determined to show their respect for their martyred fellow citizens and support for

their families.

A brass band, with its drums draped with black cloth to muffle them, struck up a mournful hymn. The procession started to move. Behind the last wagon bearing the coffins, the close relatives of the martyrs were holding on to each other as they walked. Several mothers, one who had lost her only son, a student, was beyond consoling and her wailing brought nearly everyone to tears. Had it not been for people supporting and holding her as well as some of the other women, they would have fallen to their knees. It was a long, long walk to the city and the cemetery upon the hill.

The city was awash in the tri-color national flags. They had not been seen for over a year, having been replaced by the red rag with the hammer and sickle. My father commented that it was a good sign the people hiding and now retrieving the national emblem and renewing their sense of patriotism.

Church bells rang as the procession entered the city. It slowly wound on the Cemetery Street and through the gates onto the cemetery grounds. A huge grave had been prepared just inside and to the right of the main gate. Future visitors and mourners would always be reminded of the tragedy of June 1941.

After the coffins had been laid in the ground, there were many speeches by religious leaders and other notables whom I did not recognize and did not bother to ask my parents who they were. Seemingly endless, because we were too far away to hear what was being said. At last the final words were said and a priest walked along the edges of the mass grave and sprinkled holy water on the white coffins. Men, dressed in their Sunday best started to shovel dirt to cover the grave.

At that moment heart rendering wails rose from the mother of the martyred student and other women. I told my

parents I did not feel well and that I was going home. The truth really was that I did not feel good and wanted to go home.

My cat Pilkis was standing by our door and seeing me he purred and wound himself around my legs. He was grey, like smoke, not dark oily smoke but the smoke of paper or very dry leaves. His behavior was not like him; normally he was aloof. I grabbed him, hugged him to my chest and took him into the house. I felt like crying, but I did not know why.

Chapter 5

Summer of 1941

My father, a border policeman during Lithuania's independence, was one of several former security officers who took on the local police responsibility in German-occupied Lithuania. Unlike the Soviets, the Nazis gave Lithuania a measure of autonomy. A national government was formed in Kaunas, reporting to the Nazi "*Gauleiter*" in charge of the newly conquered lands in "*Ost Gebiet*," which included the three Baltic States. The individual districts formed their own local governments and security was put into the hands of professional police officers. My mother, a German translator and an administrative assistant to the Governor in Klaipeda before our eviction, took on similar duties with the City of Telsiai. She was fluent in German and Russian and also spoke Polish, which made her an asset in the confusion of administering to peoples' needs in the aftermath of the Soviet occupation.

Our Aunt Vincenta, my father's older, unmarried sister, was a seamstress with her own successful business. Throughout the occupation, the brief war and the time that followed, she hardly missed a day of work. She managed several apprentices, young girls learning the sewing trade, and

her order book was almost always full. Women needed dresses, my aunt's specialty, in good times or bad.

Compensation for her work, however, was another matter: During independence she was paid in Litas, the national gold-based currency. That was fine. The Russian occupiers had introduced their *Ruble* at some outrageous exchange rate. The *Ruble* soon became nearly worthless because there was nothing to buy. Bartering with food, sugar, tobacco and flour became the legal tender during the latter part of the Soviet occupation. At this time, the *Reichsmark* introduced by the Germans was an unknown element.

Aunt Antanina, my mother's older sister, also unmarried, was a member of our immediate family. She had finished middle school before the so-called Great War in St. Petersburg, Russia, and had moved back to Telsiai just before the Russian revolution. She gave up her job when our mother asked her to move to Klaipeda and be the nanny first to my brother and later to both of us. My mother's full-time career with the Lithuanian government outweighed stay at home motherhood when a loving sister agreed to move in and help raise the kids.

As a toddler I had actually believed that Aunt Antanina was my mother and the love between us was mutual. This arrangement was in effect once again when my parents took on their respective jobs with the local government. Antanina kept house, cooked and did her best to care for my brother and me, not an easy task.

During the rest of the summer, on warm, sunny days my brother and I and other boys our age spent time at Mastis Lake chasing each other in the shallow water and learning to swim. There were three beaches a few kilometers away from the city. One was for families, the second for men and boys only and the third was a women's beach. Each was separated by tall reeds and willows. No bathing suits were required at

the segregated beaches. The men's beach is where we would toss down our towels, jump out of our clothes and wade in on the muddy bottom in to the slightly murky water. The water in the summer was never cold and the bottom at our beach was uniformly smooth with a steadily increasing depth. A few of the older boys already could swim and they would show off to us by going further out where you could no longer stand up. The universal swimming stroke was the "folk" or sidestroke. We would wade in chest deep and then jump up, lie down on a side and stroke overhand with one arm while trying to scissor kick our legs. It took practice; we were determined to learn, and it was not long before we managed not to drown with our feet off the bottom for a dozen meters or so. By the end of that summer I felt that I could swim but I did not venture into deep water.

There were a number of ways we could get ourselves into trouble with our parents, several on the beach alone. My brother said: "Look at what Prunce is doing," pointing to an older kid. Pranas, we called him Prunce, a year or two older than my brother, had pulled out a small bag out of his pants pocket. He took out a strip of newspaper, creased it and poured some loose tobacco into it. He then licked and actually chewed the edge of the paper with his front teeth, rolled it into a cylinder and stuck it between his lips. Striking a match on the side of a matchbox, he cupped his hand around the homemade cigarette and touched the flame to its end. Smoke came out of his nose as he took a puff.

Arutis was wistful as he watched the smoke drift around Prunce. I could tell he also wanted to try it and had come close to taking a puff once from my father's discarded butt. For all I knew he had tried it successfully on other occasions when I was not around to see it. My father smoked but in no uncertain terms had told us not to start and promised severe punishment if we were ever caught.

The other potential problem was not my brother's or my doing. The older boys were forever trying to peek at the naked women and girls on the adjoining beach. Swimming beyond the reeds further into the lake and looking back was not a good option. The women would see you and yell while covering themselves. That left sneaking through the reeds. It could be done, but it took patience, which was not abundant among the older boys. When detected, the women would grab their towels first then switches and come after the boys in the reeds. Neither I nor my brother was that adventurous and I even wondered what the big attraction was anyhow, to risk welts on your bare back. How do you explain that to your parents?

On days when rain threatened and the beach was not an option we stayed in the streets, or drifted to the basketball court hoping that someone with a decent ball would let us play. That almost never happened and the ball Antanas had found lasted only few days before it went flat and beyond repair. The football field was another destination and players could be found there virtually all day. They were older and were not interested in having us join them. We watched them for a while and when we became bored we would walk over to the side of the field where horizontal bars were set up on posts for potential gymnasts. We would boost each other up, grab the bar and do chin-ups. Bored with that, we would find ourselves back on the streets.

One of our most frequent pastimes was fighting. Perceived grievances were attempted to be settled with slingshots and thrown stones by hand at each other – not as individuals, one on one – but in groups. Each street or a small area of the city produced a group of boys who stuck with each other and became friends and every other group was the “enemy.” So it was with us; Antanas and my brother were co-leaders of our group, consisting of five to seven boys

including me. I was the youngest but also a member because my brother did not know what else to do with me. I was always there because I always followed him and he did not know how to get rid of me.

Spotting someone from another “gang” on the street, we would hurl insults at him or them, depending on the headcount.

“Did you rob a poor Russian to get that shirt?” one of us would yell.

“No, stupid. I found it on your mother’s clothesline,” he would shout back and laugh.

“Come closer and say that! Now we know who has been sneaking around and swiping stuff off the clotheslines. Step over here,” we said, pointing to the ground, “and we will see if you are still smirking!”

“I will, just as soon as my friends get here. Then we’ll see who is not smiling.”

A stone would be thrown and the slingshots would come out. We would aim at their legs and if they ran, we considered that our victory. If they came back with a larger number than our group we would retreat but not before tossing some insults and stones their way. Occasionally a stone would find somebody and a welt would be raised but blood hardly ever was drawn. There was never a conclusive victory, nor a loss. It was a game boys played, imitating the adult world of war. Adults never interfered and now I think of it as strange that we hardly ever saw adults. And perhaps none of them ever saw us. At home we were constantly admonished not to fight, but that seemed like a standard, routine admonishment that parents of boys kept on hand without any specific incident in mind.

From time to time during these skirmishes there would come a pause, an automatic truce brought about by a man of God. He would appear, walking in the street, never in

a hurry. He lived at the Russian Orthodox Church, which stood on a small hill beyond the end of Birutes Street. We called him Pope and we never knew his destination, he just walked, but as soon as we saw him we would stop whatever we were doing and run to him. He was an Orthodox priest, always in full regalia, a large cross hanging from his neck. He had a long, grayish beard, which hid his mouth but seemed to accent his smiling eyes. He could have been 50 or 80 years old. We would ask for his blessing and bow our heads. He would make the sign of the Orthodox cross over us and if he ever said anything we did not know what it was since we didn't understand his language. He would then continue on his way and we would pick up where we left off. Words were not needed. At those moments, somehow we all felt better about ourselves and the world around us. We had been in the presence of someone special. This happened relatively frequently and the routine never varied.

Thinking about those blessings in the middle of the street it occurred to me, a Catholic from a Catholic, churchgoing family, that had we seen a Catholic priest walking the same path, we probably would have run away and hidden ourselves and would have hoped that the priest had not seen us and whatever we were engaged in at that time.

Much later the truth of this came to me: The Russian priest did not judge us. He showed his love and the love of God to all who crossed his path, children especially. On the other hand, the Catholic priests were always admonishing us for this, or for that, either from the pulpit or in a classroom and our priests seemed to look at us more like potential sinners and mischief makers in need of constant prodding.

The summer that we thought would never end was coming to a close. Days were noticeably shorter, nights were cool and it felt good to crawl under the covers and more

difficult to slide out from under them in the morning. School would be swinging its doors open very soon.

Chapter 6

School

The school year of 1940-1941 had been chaotic for a number of reasons: It started late due to the Soviet Army's occupation of several school buildings in the city that followed the search and subsequent adaptation of classrooms in substitute facilities. Changes in curriculum in all grades were forcibly implemented, stressing the glory of communism in place of the former civic and "knowing your country" subject in the lower grades. Religion classes were out. Teachers who had been retained even in non-political subjects, such as math, had to be indoctrinated and to absorb the regime's requirements for uniformity of thought and loyalty to communism and to the "Father and Teacher," Joseph Stalin.

New textbooks were slow in arriving from the presses in the Lithuanian language. Much of the formerly taught history was revised to be in step with what was taught in Russia. Recent Lithuanian history, with its heroes in the war for independence, was scrapped altogether. Geography, seemingly a benign science, was least affected but it now showed Moscow as the center of the universe.

The end of the school year was also shaky due to the first wave of deportations, which had included a number of

teachers. The rumors of imminent war with Germany had taken on a conviction of reality already in May of that year and it had a negative and disruptive impact to the communist teachers and especially the administrators. The administrators were the true believers in communism, which is why they were in those posts in the first place. All of a sudden their first concern was to save their skins, making their escape plans from Lithuania. It was strange to hear them teach about the invincibility of the Soviet army while they were secretly packing their cardboard suitcases and hoarding smoked meats and other food for their trip east. Students, as well as their parents, were also distracted by this palpable feeling of uncertainty. Exams at the end of the school year were held as usual, but they seemed somewhat hollow and not reassuring either to the students or their parents.

The beginning of the 1941-1942 school year in the first days of September in some ways seemed like starting the previous year all over again. This was more evident in the higher grades and had very little effect on me. I was looking forward to school.

On the first day of school in Lithuania, it is a tradition to dress the students in their finest and parents proudly accompany the younger kids to their classes. That day was like a holiday. My mother and my Aunt Antanina walked me to Simonas Daukantas primary school. My father was already at work. The school building had housed some elements of the Soviet occupation but had been refurbished during the summer and was ready for us. For the most part the teachers who had survived the purges and the deportations took up where they had left off during the last year of independence. Changes in curriculum resulting from the Nazi occupation did not affect the lower grades and if there were new requirements the regime had dictated in the higher grades, I was not aware of them.

Class started as usual with the teacher walking into the classroom, with everybody becoming silent and jumping to their feet. Our school day began with the teacher leading us in prayer. No one sat down until the teacher gave us permission. She was one of a number of teachers who had survived the previous occupation and we were glad to see her because we liked her. Her daughter, the same age as me and my classmates, sat in the front row. She was smart; she knew it and she would be teased about being teacher's favorite for the rest of the year, in spite of the fact that we saw no favoritism of any kind. She received good grades because she listened, learned and did her homework.

In the lower grades, one teacher taught all subjects, with the exception of a class in religion; that was conducted by the school chaplain. There were short breaks between subjects and a longer one for lunch. The schoolyard was fenced off and we were not permitted to leave the school grounds. Recess and pauses between classes, weather permitting, were spent outside. Tag was the most popular game and was played at full speed by the boys. Girls jumped rope or simply walked in a circle, chattering among themselves. The school days soon became routine.

On Saturdays the school day was shorter and we looked forward to the end of the week. On Sunday it was mandatory for us to attend the students' mass in the cathedral at 9:00 in the morning. Attendance was checked and it affected our grade in religion, otherwise a very easy subject.

My friend Saulius and I walked to school and back together. He and his family had moved to Telsiai from Mazeikiai a few years back. His father managed a textile factory. He had no brothers or sisters and we became close friends during the school year. He did not run with our street gang because he was my age and my brother and his friends would not accept him. Saulius and I did our homework

together; I often helped him because I could already read well even before I started school, thanks to my Aunt Antanina, and Saulius was just catching up.

I enjoyed reading and I would keep my mother company to the city library, which was run by her very good friend, Miss Girdvainyte. The librarian always had a stack of books she had selected for me to take home. My favorite book, which I read over and over, was called *Finnish Folk Tales*. Its heroes were very wise and clever wild animals – foxes, badgers and beavers, to name a few – living in the woods and lakes of Finland. I was fascinated by their adventures and could not get enough of them.

Fall turned into winter. In December it started to get dark by 3:30 in the afternoon and did not break into full daylight until close to 9:00 in the morning. On cloudy days, when the sun did not show its face the entire day, it seemed like twilight. A week before Christmas, the schools let out for a two-week holiday break, which would end immediately after the second day of the New Year holiday. It had been snowing since about the middle of December and on our first day free from school we could not wait to go sledding. We rushed through breakfast, told our aunts not to worry about us and were out of the house.

“I am first,” my brother said, as we half ran, half walked toward the hill where the Russian Orthodox Church majestically occupied the summit. That was the best hill for sledding in our part of the city. The sled belonged to the both of us and it could seat two, but Arutis preferred to lie face down and, steering with his toes after a running start, would streak down the hill. There were other boys and a few girls on their sleds but the hill was never crowded and after a while the snow became packed down and became even faster. There were older kids on skis and we watched them with envy.

“I will meet you at the bottom,” I told Arutis. “When you get down I will take the sled and you wait for me.”

Taking turns, we raced with other kids. At times we would ride double, but Arutis always sat in front and I had to straddle the sled in the back hugging him. The only good thing about that arrangement was that he took the brunt of punishment whenever we took a spill, which was quite often. “You did that on purpose,” I would accuse him with my mouth full of snow.

I think that was his way to discourage me from insisting on taking my turn. Sharing a sled was not fun, but neither one of us would give up, sell or barter his share. There were no lights on the hill and by twilight most everyone would be gone.

“One more time after you take your turn,” he would say and usually we were the last to head for home. Tired, wet and hungry, we would stumble onto our porch, pleased with the way the day had gone and looking forward to more of the same tomorrow.

Chapter 7

Winter of 1942

Christmas at our house was celebrated in the traditional Samogitian way with a fast during the Advent period, which was concluded by a Christmas Eve supper consisting of twelve non-meat dishes. The table was covered with straw and our best tablecloth was placed on top. Various fish and vegetable dishes were featured for this one of a kind meal of the year. After saying Grace, the holy wafer was first broken by my father and passed to everyone in turn to share and to wish Merry Christmas to each member of the family at the table. Our Christmas tree had been cut and brought home by my father with our help from the nearby woods. We all decorated it with straw ornaments. The highlight was a dozen real, small candles clipped onto its branches. Lights were doused, the candles were lit and it was a spectacular sight, if only for a few minutes, as we listened to Christmas music on our radio. The adults went off to the midnight mass at the cathedral while my brother and I fought to see who would sleep with Pilkis, our cat.

Christmas morning my brother and I were surprised by the presents that each of us received. For weeks we had been told how times were hard and we should not be

expecting presents when there were shortages of everything. Our parents had told us that there was barely enough food stored to last through the winter and that all the toy factories had been converted to produce guns, ammunition and other war material. True to their words, there were no toys under our tree that morning, but there were sweets and books and, for my brother, the most cherished gift of a thick pad of drawing paper and colored pencils. My brother liked to draw as much as I liked to read and blank paper pad was a great gift. Our parents smiled seeing our surprised and excited faces.

Dressed in our best, our family walked up our street and to the steps leading to the Cathedral to celebrate the high mass. The church was packed. As was customary, the men went to the right, my mom and my two aunts to the left. Arutis and I lost our father in the crowd and we squirmed ourselves up the stairs to the second floor, standing room only, near the organ. The seminarians occupied their regular seats along the wall closer to the altar.

Because the chorus had a full repertoire of Christmas hymns, the mass seemed to stretch to tomorrow. The long homily, which was too far away for us to be able to hear, did not help matters and only the singing and the powerful organ kept our feet in place. Finally, the blessing and we were out!

Christmas dinner was next! Before we could make our move toward home, however, there was another tradition to uphold: Every familiar face in the churchyard had to be greeted, their hands shaken and a wish for a merry Christmas offered. In spite of the cold weather, our parents chatted up their friends and neighbors and were greeted in turn by others. It was a good half hour before we broke free and made our way home.

Goose, stuffed and with all the trimmings, was the main course of our Christmas dinner. We said grace and

thanked God for keeping us safe and together during these awful times. My father then brought out small glasses and a bottle of a pre-war government-made clear whiskey. The adults toasted each other and added wishes for an end to war, independence for our country and the return of normal or “good” times. Friends and relatives exiled to Siberia were remembered in our prayers. Another toast was raised to their health and perseverance with the expressed wish for their quick return. Silently, the tears of my mother and aunts spoke of grief and of hope. By the end of the meal, we were all stuffed like the goose that had been the centerpiece.

The traditional second day of Christmas, an official holiday, was spent attacking the leftovers and relaxing with card games. The games we played were called “66” and “Thousand” – father was very good at both and we learned from him. We also listened to the radio and mother would tune in German stations and translate news that invariably spoke of German victories in the East.

Occasionally, and this was something that we did not quite grasp and yet adults considered important, was the news from the other side of the world. Japan was beating the British and the Americans in places we had never heard of. Singapore was the exception because it was mentioned repeatedly and we found it on a world map. We knew that we had relatives in America, but Japan was on the side of Germany and thus against Russia, our enemy. Confusing...

To ring in the year 1942, the celebration was at our house. My parents had invited some of their friends for drinks and snacks. After our evening meal, my brother and I were told to go to bed and not to show ourselves at the festivities. As if! When the party was in full swing we snuck in to the dining room and hid ourselves behind a large fig tree. There was enough smoke from cigarettes and several pipes to screen a battle ship. We did manage to swipe some pieces of

smoked sausage but if truth were told the adults were boring and their jokes were not funny. Before we went back to bed Arutis said: "Let's see what Pilkis is up to!"

The winter of '42 was the most brutal and cold in anyone's living memory. There were days that schools had to close because of frozen water pipes. We stayed at home close to the cooking stove or the baking oven fired with wood. Someone said that the temperature one night had fallen to minus 40 degrees Centigrade, or Celsius, as we called it. Daytime temperatures stuck at between -20 and -25 C. To go out on those days was to invite instant frostbite.

We did not need the radio to remind us to think of the soldiers in battle further east and north, where the temperatures were even lower. The German army had cruised through Lithuania in June in their summer uniforms with the goal of defeating the Russians before the start of winter. That did not happen. The German offensive had stalled in the Russian mud in the fall and stayed there stuck when the arctic winds blew in the snow and sub-zero temperatures. There were drives for warm clothing in Lithuania – and I am certain in Germany and its occupied countries – asking for sweaters, blankets and wool socks. Winter uniforms were rushed from the factories to the front, but there weren't nearly enough of them. The Russians called winter their other army and between them they caused a huge number of casualties that brought an ugly part of the war back to our city. The German army appropriated the seminary building, next to the Cathedral, for a hospital. Wounded and severely frostbitten soldiers came to Telsiai by rail and were transported to the former Catholic priests' school on a hill near our home.

Sometime later that winter, both my brother and I

came down with colds. We stayed home from school and our mother stuck a thermometer in our armpits before she left for work. Our temperatures were slightly elevated but not so high as to cause concern. She made us drink warm milk and instructed us to stay out of the draft. I was coughing and sneezing and bored with nothing to do. Because of the snow we had missed a trip to the library and I had no books to read. My brother's cough, however, was from deep in his chest and when my mother checked his temperature in the evening it had gone up two degrees, to 41.5 C. I could see Mom was worried.

I had slept through most of the night and when I woke up at dawn my mother and my Aunt Antanina were sitting next to Arutis's bed. His temperature had not gone down and they had to change his sheets twice during the night because of his excessive perspiration. The only medicine in the house was aspirin and Arutis was given an adult dosage every four hours. In addition to the high temperature and heavy perspiration, my brother was hallucinating, talking with someone only he could see. Now I was scared. A doctor was summoned and arrived with his bag and stethoscope. He spent a lot of time thumping Arutis's chest and listened to his breathing pressing the scope first to his chest then to his back.

"Pneumonia," he said to my mother. "Your son has pneumonia and his condition is serious. Normally I would recommend placing him in a hospital but the situation there, because of the war and shortage of nursing care and medicine, is not good and it may be best to keep him at home. I know your sister Antanina as a very intelligent and caring person. Between you two he will be in better hands here."

He looked at me, put his hand on my forehead, listened to my pulse and asked how I felt. Before I could

reply he pointed to Arutis and said: "Make certain he drinks a lot of fluids, fruit juices and clear broth and I will be back tomorrow at this same time." He left a small bottle of liquid medicine and instructions on how to administer it. With those words he packed up his instruments, put on a heavy coat and hat and left our house.

My parents and aunts were desperate. Pneumonia was a very serious illness and in too many instances was fatal. The whole family turned to prayer asking God to spare Arutis. Aunt Vincenta walked to church and later I found out she had made a special offering for a Mass naming Arutis. My mother seemed to be in a trance asking Jesus to intercede with His Father to heal my brother. I, too, said the prayers that I knew but could not understand how that would influence God who had power over all living things and there was nothing He did not know, including my fear of losing my brother.

Home remedies were discussed and one was implemented on my brother by my aunts. This was utilizing special glass globes, nearly the size of a drinking glass. In order to create vacuum in them, an alcohol-soaked cotton ball on a stick is lit and placed inside the globe for a brief moment, holding the globe near the patient's bare back. After quickly withdrawing the flame from the globe, it was immediately placed on the patient's back. This was repeated as rapidly as possible with five or six more globes, the number depending on the size of the patient. Care was taken not to place the globes in the vicinity of the heart. Arutis, with the globes on him, was then covered with a blanket.

The globes created a healing suction and after about 15 minutes the globes were removed, leaving red blotches on the skin for several days. There was a universal belief that this process was effective and my aunts and my mother were convinced it would help heal Arutis.

Another home remedy was mare's milk. How and where my father was able to obtain a jugful I never found out, but there it was and my mother forced it down Arutis's throat. Either my mother or one of my aunts never left his bedside. They constantly monitored his temperature and changed his sheets, boiling the ones taken from his bed, washing and drying by ironing them for another change. The coming nightfall would be crucial in the progress of his illness.

The next morning when I woke up, the doctor was examining my brother. His temperature had dropped considerably. He was not well yet but the doctor was much more optimistic about the outcome and praised my mother and my aunts, crediting them with the patient's improvement. My mother, on the other hand, was convinced that the Lord had answered our prayers. The doctor left instructions for further care and said he would be available if needed. I was pleased to see my brother being more like himself and very glad not to have to listen to his hallucinations.

It was a lengthy recovery for Arutis. I was back in school within a few days but it was two weeks before my mother thought Arutis was fit to go outside and a few more days after that to be able to attend classes full time. He had some catching up to do with his schoolwork. Fortunately, the start of the Easter holiday was only around the corner and that gave us two weeks at home, tutored by Aunt Antanina and our mother. Plenty of time to bring Arutis back into the groove with his classmates and to become current with the schoolwork.

By then I had already forgotten that I had skipped three days of classes. School was easy for me. I was looking forward to spring, the end of the school year and to the summer.

Chapter 8

Summer of 1942

At the end of April I became one year older. This was very important to me and I proudly announced this fact to anyone who would listen – most importantly my brother's friends, who had not fully accepted me into their ranks because I was too young. As it turned out, my becoming a year older made no difference to them because they too had become older by one year at one time or another. And so it was that I continued to follow Arutis whenever he left home and tagged along with the gang.

There was another change in my school routine that spring. The German army's takeover of the seminary and the expanded requirements for their hospital's staffing and support made it necessary to move individual schools to whatever alternate facilities that could be located and adopted for school needs. Our S. Daukantas facility was taken over by part of the middle school which, in turn, had given up its building by military appropriation, always the first priority. For the rest of the school year, which was about four weeks, our classes shifted to a former small business office building. School desks, blackboards and whatever administrative records were moved to the new facility. We were given two

days off while the move took place.

We managed somehow to continue our lessons in spite of the fact that the new classrooms were too small and the classes had to be split in half, with the teacher shifting from one room to the next, dividing her time equally between the rooms. The breaks between classes were chaotic, the toilet facilities too few and not well suited for kids. There was no schoolyard to play in and the neighboring people were not pleased with the noise that we generated coming and going. Our parents were told that a more suitable building would be found for the fall session. We will see, we thought.

One day, soon after the school had let out for the summer, my brother and I were leaving our yard when we saw a commotion up the street with kids and adults, including some German soldiers milling around and gesturing with their arms. Arutis said: "Let's see what gives over there."

There, in the middle of the street near the bottom of the steps leading to the Cathedral, was a horse on its side desperately trying to get back on its legs but unable because we could clearly see that its front leg was broken. In obvious pain and neighing loudly, the horse was constantly moving its head up and down, baring its teeth and tossing its bridle in the air. A soldier tried to grab the reins without success. Other than that one soldier, no one else seemed to know what to do.

"That poor horse," said my brother. "I wonder what happened to it."

A German army officer appeared on the scene, looked at the horse's leg, shook his head and drew his automatic pistol from a holster on his belt. He aimed the pistol at the horse's head and fired. The horse shuddered and again made an attempt to get up, but another shot from the pistol put it down and out of its misery. What happened next surprised everyone: Two soldiers, in uniform but also wearing

white aprons and hats like cooks wear, cut the horse's throat with a huge knife. They then proceeded to chop up the horse into manageable pieces with knives and cleavers and loaded the dismembered carcass into a wagon that had been waiting. Off they went, back to their hospital kitchen. For us eating horsemeat was unheard of, but in war time stranger things could happen.

Later we learned that the horse was one of two being unhitched from a German army wagon near their hospital when it bolted for reasons unknown, and in a panic raced down the path that looked like a roadway leading away from the hospital and Cathedral. It had been chased by several soldiers; the horse did not see the steps leading down in time to stop. It stumbled and crashed down the steep steps leading to our street, breaking its leg in the process. We did not see the horse crash, but we did witness the shooting and had enough stories without too much embellishment to entertain our friends for several days. We would take them to the path and the steps and reenact the incident and show bloodstains in the cobbled street as evidence.

Days of summer went by quickly. At the end of June, a memorial was held at the cemetery for the first year's anniversary of the massacre of the martyrs in Rainiai Woods. It was a very solemn occasion, with a special mass held at the Cathedral. There were meetings where people gathered to hear speeches naming the victims and offering condolences to their relatives. Promises were made to always remember their names and to search, find and punish the perpetrators of this inhuman crime. No one had doubts that they sat somewhere in communist Russia wondering if retribution would reach them in the wake of the once again advancing German army.

My most pleasant memories of that summer were of my trips with Arutis and our father back to Tausalas Lake.

We would visit the farmer who had given us shelter the year before, this time without any of us looking over our shoulders in fear of being discovered. Mostly it was only us “men;” our mother stayed in the city to rest. It was fun to spend afternoons at the beach and swim in the lake. Unlike the Mastis men’s beach, Tausalas had a sandy shore and the water was clear. Our father would toss us into the deeper water and watch us sidestroke back. That summer I became confident that I could swim and would venture further into the lake, stop and try to touch the bottom with my toes. If I touched it I would swim further and, finding myself in deep water, I would not panic and continue to stroke and kick.

Some of these outings to Tausalas Lake were overnight affairs. The friendly farmer would invite us for supper and put us up for the night in his hayloft. We would not fall asleep until well after darkness surrounded us. The farm’s animals were spending their nights in the pasture and we would wake to the sound of milk pails banging as the women gathered them in preparation of milking the cows. We would dash to the lake for a swim and come back as hungry as wolves for a breakfast of fried eggs, bread with butter and fresh milk.

Part of each day was spent in the woods picking berries. It took us awhile, but we developed the skill and the eye to spot areas where bilberries and wild strawberries were likely to grow and we would descend on those spots like crows on spilled grain to pick them. We did not have baskets and we used cones made out of paper to save whatever we did not stuff in our mouths. The ripe ones were sweet and juicy and we would eat our fill before we got tired of constantly stooping or kneeling. We were told that these woods were also good for finding mushrooms but it was too early in the season and we would need to return in the fall. We would be in school by then and someone else could pick

them.

School started on schedule that year in a more suitable facility had that been found and set up for classes. The teacher no longer had to split her time between two classrooms. Other than not having a normal schoolyard to run around in during recess, our classes were being conducted in the same fashion as in normal, pre-war times, or so I was told. I had been too young to go to a school before the war, only kindergarten, and I had no difficulty in staying with and ahead of my lessons in reading and arithmetic. Much the same with Arutis, only his favorite class was drawing and he excelled in it.

As always, war news was present in our lives and we were interested in knowing the progress that the German army was making in Russia. Their summer offensive had restarted their forward progress, which had stalled during the winter months. While not as rapidly as in the summer of a year ago, the German army was nearing Moscow and in the south they were within shouting distance of Volgograd, later renamed Stalingrad in order to bolster the spirits of the Red Army defenders of that city. Once again the German radio was full of optimism, announcing a total victory before Christmas.

For us, a sign of war not seen before that fall was an occasional flight of Russian warplanes. During the day, their small number stayed at higher altitudes, out of range of the smaller caliber anti-aircraft guns. At night, however, they were more aggressive and we could hear them clearly as they searched for targets. For that reason, blackout was in effect and was enforced by the local police patrols. One morning when we arrived at school we were informed that the school custodian was dead. It seems that he had panicked hearing a low flying aircraft right over his roof and ran out the door. Evidently the pilot saw the momentary light from the

doorway and dropped his bomb load, killing the custodian. All of us students were instructed to write letters of condolence to his family.

Chapter 9

War Worm Turns

That the news of certain victory by the Germans might not be as reliable and as assured as the newscasters claimed could be disputed by some of the things we saw ourselves. First, the traffic to and from the army hospital on the hill seemed heavier than in the past. This fluctuated and by itself would not have held up as proof of heavier German casualties or battle losses. It was the second event that caused us concern and worry. One day my brother came home all excited and said: “Did you know that they are digging up the parish churchyard?”

My mother, who seemed to be well informed of matters pertaining to the city and its surroundings, replied: “The German army has appropriated the front part of the churchyard as a cemetery for their fallen soldiers. They claim it is temporary and later the bodies will be sent home. What you probably saw were the first graves to be dug in preparation for a shipment from the front. This will not affect the church itself or the services the priest performs.”

True enough, a few days after Arutis first noticed the digging, a train pulled in to the station and a number of coffins were loaded on to wagons and transported to the

parish churchyard. The burial was closed to the public but we were told that a formal dedication of the military cemetery would be held in the next few days.

On the day of the cemetery dedication, the Germans brought a brass band and a very impressive honor guard. These tall soldiers, in full uniform and rifles at present arms, stood like statues during the entire time the band played, while speeches in German and Lithuanian were said and when a priest blessed the ground. Only when the ceremony ended did they shoulder their weapons and march off; proof to us that they were not statues.

The public was permitted to visit the graves. At the head of each mounded grave was a wooden white cross and on top sat a helmet, which we assumed had belonged to the dead soldier. I pointed to one helmet and asked my brother: "Have you noticed the holes in the helmet? Do you suppose that is how the soldier died, shot in the head through his helmet?"

"Probably," he said. "You can see where the bullet entered and where it came out. If the head was in the way, it was all over for him."

As we continued to look at the graves with the freshly mounded sandy earth and the crosses topped with helmets on them, and we noticed that all helmets had holes. Some had several and in some the steel was torn like paper where the bullet had come out.

"There is no way that every one of them was shot in the head," said Arutis.

"So what's with the bullet holes?" I asked.

"Let's ask our father, he will know."

That evening we were telling our parents about the ceremony at the new cemetery. The question of the holes in the helmets came up: "How come all the soldier's helmets in the cemetery have bullet holes in them?" I asked.

My father looked at me. "Are you sure about that?"

"Perhaps you only noticed the ones with the holes, there may be others without them."

"No," I insisted. "We looked, and they all had them."

Father thought for a while. I realized that he did not know the answer either but he saw we were serious and deserving of some kind of reply.

"There could be several reasons," he said. "The most likely one is that the helmets on each grave did not belong to that particular soldier. If he was not shot through the helmet, but was killed some other way, like by a mine or an artillery shell, and the helmet remained in good shape, they saved it to give it to someone who lost his. Instead they collected the helmets with holes as unusable for anyone except on graves.

"It also may serve another purpose; a relative or a friend visiting the grave would think that the soldier was killed instantly, shot through the head and suffered no pain."

That made a lot of sense, although I was not completely convinced. To me there seemed one other possibility: someone used them for target practice. I guess we would never know. The fact remained that the war had crept closer to us and if the trend were not reversed, our family as well as many others would need to face some god awful decisions.

The historians largely credit the battle of Stalingrad as the turning point of the war in Russia. Already, in August, the German army had reached the outskirts of Stalingrad. As with Leningrad in the north, the Russians fiercely defended both cities. It was in Stalingrad, however, where the Germans had their largest losses and suffered a massive defeat in early winter of 1943. Stalin renamed Volgograd in his name in order to bolster the defenders. Hitler did something similar by promoting the general in charge of that front to a field marshall. He knew that no German field marshall had ever

surrendered, but the newly-minted Field Marshall Von Paulus, surrounded by Russians, out of supplies, short of ammunition in the dead of Russian winter had no choice but to hoist the white flag. The war worm had turned for the worse for the Germans and before long it would change our lives.

Our only news sources were the radio and newspapers. Both were controlled by the German propaganda machine. Newspapers devoted their pages mostly to the local news and steered clear of any controversy or politics that was not approved by the appointed censors. The news of the world at large and the war itself came to us on the short wave radio from Kaunas in Lithuanian and from Berlin, Leipzig, Königsberg and other German cities in the German language, of which our mother would translate the highlights to the rest of the family.

The source made no difference regarding the content of the news; they were all the same, manufactured in Berlin and reported only victories. “Strategic withdrawal” we learned to read as a defeat and they became more frequent as the year wore on. There were victories and the summer of 1943 saw their share of them for the Germans. But even those became more muted as the Germans now were reporting fierce battles in Africa against the British and Americans. Americans! That was news!

One more aspect of the war, this one close to home, was the new “bandit” activity in the countryside. Russian sympathizers, those who had not managed to escape with the Red Army and had been hiding, were beginning to make a showing by attacking local government facilities and people. Russians were in contact with them and were dropping weapons and other materials and were known to have

parachuted soldiers in order to disrupt the German communications and supplies. In 1943 the “bandit” groups were too small and too disorganized to do damage to the German army, but were becoming a nuisance in some of the regional communities in the countryside.

Our father, who was a policeman, would be called to join a group of other policemen in order to hunt them down. He would strap on his rifle, pack his pockets with extra ammo and head out, reassuring us with a smile and a promise that this was a minor action and he’d be back in no time. At those moments, looking at our mother, we knew she was worried and would remain worried until he came home. Most of the time these raids came to nothing and by the time the policemen arrived at the incident site the bandits were long gone.

Before the year had ended, our family’s future became the main daily topic of conversation. If the Germans lost the war and the Russians moved back in, we could not remain in our homes. That was an unarguable fact and there was no disagreement that we would need to move, but the question then rose up: Where to?

Because there was no clear answer, the conversation would eventually turn to a series of what ifs. If there was to be an armistice, where would the Russians stop? Would it be back to their pre-war borders? Unlikely! Stalin would insist on keeping the Baltic States. Would the Western allies of Britain and the United States come to recognize the evil that communism represented and switch sides? In theory that seemed the best scenario and rumors to that effect were rampant for a time – Hitler suing for peace in the west and, if successful, turning his entire might against the Bolshevik menace. Rumors have a life of their own and this one persisted until rumors of the results of the Yalta conference started to leak out.

Stronger than rumors and giving hope that the front would stabilize east of us was the news of the secret weapons the Germans were in the process of developing. We were constantly told that they would be instrumental in future victories. The German propaganda was not shy about the success of hitting London with their new V-1 buzz bombs and promises of bigger and more powerful rockets to come. V-2 followed by V-3, faster aircraft with longer range and larger bomb loads and technological advances that would ensure the survival of the thousand-year Reich.

Days stretched into weeks and months with our lives stable for the time being but with much concern about the future. The year 1943 ended as it had begun, except for the map that had tracked the front lines for us; virtually the entire front had crept closer and winter was coming, the “other Russian army,” the cause of Napoleon’s defeat and more recently the added punch for victory at Stalingrad. Without dramatic changes in world politics or the advancement of “miracle weapons” by the Germans, we would not see the end of 1944 at home.

In the winter and spring of 1944, my class in school received intense religious instructions to prepare us for our first Holy Communion and our confirmation. Normally religion classes were easy and we mostly listened to the chaplain with one ear as he preached to us, but this communion preparation was hard, full of memorization, some of it in Latin. We were also asked to sign a vow stating that we would not drink alcohol before our twenty-first birthdays. To us this was a solemn occasion and we firmly believed that we would keep this solemn promise to God.

On a beautiful late spring afternoon, the entire class gathered at the cathedral to go to our first confession. I was scared to death that I would forget and not confess a sin I had committed. If I remembered it later would I need to go

to confession again? Finally it was my turn at the confessional. I was glad that the priest behind the curtain was not our school chaplain. I remembered the words we had been instructed to say as we entered and kneeled inside the ornate wooden confessional, but the rest was just a blur. Too much rehearsal, not enough real thought, a lesson for the next time.

After the priest's blessing we would be free from sin and on the following day, Sunday, we would receive our first communion. Until then we had to fast and as hard as that was it was even more challenging to keep from sinning in our own thoughts. How does one shut his mind and love all humanity with so much evil around us? The war was evil, we had been told, and in the eyes of God killing was a mortal sin. And yet, there was no mistaking the message on each German soldier's belt buckle: "*Gott mit Uns.*" My mother had translated it for me: "God is with us."

On that glorious Sunday morning, dressed in a new suit, I was nervous but could not wait to receive Jesus as my savior. I wondered what that would feel like when the holy wafer entered my mouth. Would I be able to speak, I wondered. Being free from sin would I be able to see the aura around the bishop's head? What other changes would there be in my life, other than having to go to confession?

The class, boys and girls separately, walked up to the front of the church and we kneeled at the white, cloth-covered altar barrier. The church was full – parents, grandparents and other relatives watched us receive the holy wafer.

After the mass was a separate ceremony, presided by the bishop himself, confirming us into the Catholic faith. In normal times, we were too young for confirmation but there was an uneasy feeling that there may not be any ceremonies in the year to come. It had been a long morning and I was famished.

Chapter 10

Goodbye Telsiai

By summer of 1944, very few people believed that the Russians could be stopped. The Germans were forced to shift part of their forces from the eastern front to France where the allies were advancing to retake Paris. More and more the Nazi propaganda focused on new weapons and technological advances in place of battles won and prisoners taken. I did not need to understand the German language to note the increasingly shrill tone of the radio news announcer from Berlin. We knew for certain that we had to get out and the only question was where to go.

Refugees from the eastern part of Lithuania had been moving west through Telsiai, hoping to cross the border into Germany. Families in horse-drawn wagons loaded with household goods would stop on the outskirts of our city in order to rest and feed their animals. The big question on everyone's minds was: "Is the border open?" No one, including our family, knew for certain what the situation was like at the border even as we began to pack our belongings. Father had obtained a wagon and two horses and we were to form a small convoy for safety from the bandits, who had been more active recently. With like-minded friends and

neighbors we set out for the German border in southwestern Lithuania.

In the wagon, our family sat on top of our suitcases, bags of clothing, crates of pots and pans and a foot-powered Singer sewing machine brought by Aunt Vincenta. She was confident that she could find work wherever we finally settled and that there would always be a need for her craft. Our father drove the horses with his rifle next to him in the open with mom at his side and Aunt Antanina keeping her eye on us.

There was a general consensus among all the refugees whom we met on the road that if we would somehow be able to reach Germany, we would be safe because the German army would fiercely defend their border and keep the Russian hordes out.

Two days into our journey, as we stopped at a farm to rest, strong rumors reached us that there were severe restrictions as to who would be permitted to cross the border into Germany. We stayed at that farm for several days, undecided not only about our ability to cross the border but also worried about our current means of transportation. Horses required constant care, the wagon was not new and if one of the wheels broke who would fix it? The farms closer to the border were getting crowded with refugees from all parts of Lithuania and food as well as feed for horses was becoming scarce and expensive. The decision to turn around, however, was made when news of the German offensive drove the Russians back and the front stabilized outside Lithuania's territory.

Back to Telsiai and home. To our surprise it had not been broken into or damaged in our absence. Our cat Pilkis sat by the door as if nothing unusual had happened and was expecting us all along. We could see that he had not gone hungry, hunter of mice and birds that he was. While we were happy to be home and unpacking there remained a sense of

uncertainty, a feeling that we had bought a bit of time, but the bloodthirsty beast in the east would not be denied for long.

Our lives that summer returned to what could be called normal and we waited for the school term to start up as usual in the beginning of September.

Once again, the school year was delayed due to the shifting of facilities to another location. As in the past, the German military's needs were paramount as they appropriated the larger buildings in the city for their own needs. As it turned out for us, this latest disruption had no effect on our education because by October we were once again packed up to move west. The German summer offensive gave us only a temporary respite and this time we had no illusions about coming back. On certain nights we could see flashes reflected in the clouds that looked like lightning but was in fact artillery. We could not hear it yet, but it was coming. This time we packed in such a way that we would be able to carry all of our belongings in our hands and on our backs. No sewing machine. Our immediate destination was the train station.

"Put Pilkis down," my mother said. "It is not possible for us to bring him. He is going to be alright because he is used to being on his own."

As we walked out into the street, the cat meowed and followed part of the way. I turned, stomped my foot and yelled: "Go back in the yard, before some dog gets you!"

His strange and mournful cries followed us nearly halfway to the station. It was as if he knew we would never see each other again. Years later, I could still hear those meows, often I wondered what became of him. He was my cat, mine in spite brother's arguments.

Our father was the negotiator and the bribe giver. In wartime, bribes were a normal way of conducting every type of transaction and some of the currency in place of cash was

cigarettes and any type of tobacco, which was highly portable and as good as gold. My father had grown his own tobacco in our garden.

The entire process from cutting the mature leaves to being ready to roll, stuff and smoke is fairly elaborate and a lot of work. First, the leaves have to be threaded through the stem and hung to dry. Next they have to be cured with moisture consisting of sugar melted in water with valerian drops for flavor. Then the real hard work begins: the chopping of the tightly rolled leaves into small, actually tiny, bits for rolling into a cigarette or stuffing into a pipe. Our father was meticulous in creating a good product and every gram he had produced was a precious part of our baggage.

Father knew the stationmaster in Telsiai. A short conversation and passing of a gift, followed by a handshake, and we were settled in an empty westbound freight wagon. The train consisted of several freight cars and a single third-class passenger wagon. A steam engine hooked on and we were on our way! Pulling away from the city and moving west seemed to me that every kilometer we covered was one kilometer further from the blight that was trying to engulf us.

The euphoria of moving did not last long. Just outside of Kretinga, less than 50 kilometers from our journey's start, the train stopped, we were shunted to a siding; the engine uncoupled and took off without us. We were stranded. It was late in the afternoon and no one was at this tiny station, not even a gate guard. Ours was the only train in sight, but about a half hour later a passenger train full of German troops blew by, going east on the single main track. We then realized that we had been pushed off to the siding to give priority to the troop train. This made us feel better, but there was no one to ask when we would be moving again. We settled in for the night, to sleep on the wooden floor with extra clothing for a pillow, fortunate to have mild weather this time of the year.

Early next morning, Father went looking for someone responsible for our train. There were several people milling about the small station house and soon he joined them in a discussion. My brother and I went exploring; the only thing interesting within sight was the empty passenger wagon. The doors were not locked and we proceeded to inspect it. The first thing we noticed was a large quantity of empty wine bottles strewn under the seats. The result of our search to find one at least half full was zero. The bottles were interesting, most were dark and long and the writing on silver or gold bands was in German. The word "Rhine" was prominent on most of them. We concluded the previous occupants had been German army officers either coming or going to the front.

Back at our freight car, my father had come back for a small bag of tobacco. It seems another bribe was needed to make certain that the engine would be switched to our siding upon its return. It was due back sometime today and there would not be any other traffic on our line before that. We waited. Our mid-day meal was smoked sausage and bread; water for drinking had been supplied by man in the station house, now richer by a hundred grams of tobacco. The day wore on with my aunts nervously glancing eastward where now we could hear the rumble of artillery. It was a distant rumble and there was no way for us to know who was firing these guns, but that engine could not come back too soon for us.

The sigh of relief was probably heard all the way in Telsiai when we first saw the engine puffing our way. True to the rail man's words, the engine shunted back and forth and we heard the couplings banging and felt the wagon shuddering. Once again we were on our way. The next stop was Klaipeda, city where my brother and I were born, now part of Germany. We pulled into a fairly large freight yard late

in the afternoon and were told to get off because our freight car was soon to become part a train taking on a load of war material at the harbor. Lugging all our baggage, we slowly made our way to the passenger station.

We were now in the German *Reich*. My mother, who was fluent in the German language, took over as the negotiator for our family. She had previously secured documents identifying who we were and my father's identification stated that he was a Lithuanian security officer (policeman), which for the time being exempted him from being drafted into the work battalions that included all men up to 60 years of age not in uniform. These pressed gangs, guarded by SS troops, were sent to dig front line trenches as well as perform other menial tasks, such as clearing bomb rubble in the cities and highway and rail repair. Again, with much discussion and a half kilo of smoked bacon bribe plus cash for the fare, she secured us rail passenger tickets to Dresden. Our train was to depart the following morning. In the meantime we were to make ourselves as comfortable as possible.

Wartime rail travel is almost impossible to describe. The station is packed with people, most of them refugees, families with babies, children and grandparents, all sitting or standing next to piles of bundles, bags and luggage. There are soldiers on leave, some with injuries not requiring hospitalization, others returning to the front. That was Klaipeda's railway station that late afternoon and evening.

Our family struggled to stay together while keeping our eye on our belongings and looked for a spot where we could sit or lay down. We finally settled in a non-working restaurant that had been stripped of most of its chairs. People had carried them off to the waiting room, which was spacious but had only a few benches for peacetime passengers. I lay down on a table with someone's coat for a pillow and

immediately fell asleep. It had been a long day.

The next morning, while we waited to board our train, which had not yet arrived, the rumors were flying among the refugees in several languages. Most of the refugees were Lithuanians, but there were several Latvian families as well as some local Germans. Much of the gossip was speculation as to where the front lines now stood.

Everyone's concern was the Russian advance toward Tilze, Germans called it Tilsit, (now Sovetsk), which sits on the river Nemunas delta and Kursiu Mares, or Kurland Lagoon, in German. There was a single bridge crossing Nemunas. If it were captured or destroyed we would be cut off from escaping by land, leaving only the Baltic Sea as a way out. The railway officials assured everyone that the trains were running through Tilze, but their words somehow failed to stifle these rumors.

Late that morning, a passenger train pulled into the station. There was a mad scramble to get on board and try to secure seats for the family. We were only partially successful; we captured one bench, a luggage rack above it and part of the aisle for our possessions, but our father, brother and I had to stand. The wagons were nearly full, standing room only, and we were relieved to finally be on board a train heading west. Less than an hour later we pulled out of the station and were on our way again.

Our next scheduled stop was Tilze. Our train managed to cross the river, which was a great relief to everyone but our joy was short lived, because the train would not move out when it was supposed to. We just sat there. The conductor kept hopping on and off and at times we could see him outside in a conversation with the engineer. Returning to our car he would just shrug his shoulders, telling us this was only temporary and we would move soon. On the track next to us was a troop train, also stuck in place. They were headed

into the opposite direction and the soldiers in it were reluctant to engage in conversation even though with the wagon windows open we sat within arms-reach of each other.

It seemed like hours, but finally the troop train chugged off and a few minutes later we were also moving. Later we found out that there was small arms fire near the track a few kilometers from Tilze, but that had only been a Russian patrol and not their main force and the reconnaissance patrol had withdrawn when the Germans fired back. This had been the cause of the delay and if true, it meant that we had made our move west just in time. The patrol had withdrawn but the main force would not be far behind with Russian officers leading their troops in a race against each other, to see who will be the first to enter Germany. That meant medals and promotions and perhaps even a handshake by Uncle Joseph. The Russians had the momentum and numbers with orders to let nothing stop them.

Our progress deeper into Germany was slow. That evening we came to an unscheduled stop in Königsberg. In fact we were stuck for the night, but this time we knew the reason: Our train was to wait and take on additional passengers/refugees coming in by ship from Riga. We stayed on the train except for toilet breaks, fearing losing our places. Sleeping in turns on the bench or on the floor we finally saw the first light of dawn on a rainy morning. The Riga refugees, wet and cold, started to drift in and we made room for them as best as we could. These people had gone through unspeakable hardship, riding on the open deck of a warship constantly on alert for enemy aircraft. Finally, when the last person to board squeezed in to one of the wagons, we pulled out of Königsberg.

As we approached Berlin and later had gone past it, all the way to our destination, a new threat showed its teeth

to us from time to time. These were air raids and when one became imminent the train would halt and the passengers would be ordered to leave the train. If the aircraft were in sight or within our hearing, we were ordered to take whatever shelter we could find. Most of the time we would crawl under the train and while that would not protect us from a bomb our main threat came from strafing. The heavy bombers were a danger if we were in some metropolitan or industrial areas but the strafing by fighter planes during the day could occur anywhere. Singly and in pairs, they would swoop down practically to the ground and open up with their machine guns. They were particularly fond of trains but they would shoot at anything that moved. The first time I saw one of these fighters flying fairly close, I was surprised to see a white five pointed star on its wings instead of red on the tail. I was expecting red and somehow I was relieved. This indicated that perhaps we were far enough from the red menace. Air raids sounded several times during our journey and the train stopped each time, but we were fortunate and were not fired upon.

Stops due to bombed out or damaged tracks were also fairly common. These stops sometimes entailed waiting out the repairs, anywhere from a few minutes to an hour. Other times we would stop, back up beyond a crossover and take another track. As uncomfortable as we were in that crowded wagon, as long as we were moving westbound and away from the front, we did not complain. The train trip that during normal times would have been mere hours now took the better part of the day and night. Finally: Dresden, our destination but as it turned out not yet our new home.

Chapter 11

Saxony

The Germans must be given credit for efficient organization and diligence and maintaining order. In the midst of chaos that war brought, there was NSV (no idea what the initials stood for), an organization that was in charge of refugees. An older man and a woman wearing their organization badges came from the Dresden office to meet our train and assign us to individual groups for transport to homes, shelters or, in our case, to our final destination in Kamenz, a small city about 25 kilometers from Dresden. They handed out work and residence permits for the six of us and included several sheets of short-term ration coupons. Regular ration coupons would be issued later by the work department (*Arbeitsamt*) when we were settled, working and going to school. Mere money could not buy a loaf of bread or anything else without these coupons. The coupons themselves were classified by recipients' occupation, age and other factors, such as disability, special needs, etc.

Our father's work assignment was to be in a factory. Aunt Vincenta, a seamstress whose skill was in always demand, was assigned to a clothing factory sewing uniforms for women in railway services and other uniformed

occupations outside of the military. My mother and Aunt Antanina were classified as homemakers and Arutis and I were about to become students. This we discovered later, but for now we and some other people we did not know boarded a small bus to take us to Kamenz.

Dresden was a beautiful city, much larger than Klaipeda and to our surprise was hardly damaged by bombing. We were surprised because on our way to Dresden we saw a number of cities, large and small, and they all had severe bomb damage. We concluded that we mostly saw areas near the railway stations and raiyards, which were natural targets, but as our bus left the station and drove through a part of the city we did not see a single ruined building or the usual rubble in the streets. We praised our good fortune of being here and, as tired as we were, we began to look forward to what the next days would bring.

Kamenz was a town strung out along a main thoroughfare with multi-story residences and small businesses, now mostly closed, on its full length. It too was free from bomb damage, probably too small to be a target. Later we learned that there could have been another reason for not bombing Kamenz. Near the east end of the main thoroughfare stood a prisoner of war camp. Side streets led to other residences as well as schools and factories. A good-sized Lutheran church stood midway on this thoroughfare, set back by a large front yard.

Our assigned residence was a small, two-story family home. Anticipating refugees, they had fixed up the attic as an apartment but we had to share a bathroom on the second floor. The German family, the owners of this house, were about the same age as our parents and their only son, Siegfried, was about my age. Typical Germans, they were aloof, but we never felt unwelcome and if there was any resentment to us foreign intruders, we never saw it. The great

fortune was our mother's ability to communicate in their language. I can only imagine how much more difficult it would have been without her language skill.

In a matter of a few days we fell into a routine. Our father and Aunt Vincenta went to work. My brother and I were accompanied to school by our mother and Siegfried on our first day. The principal or administrator received us with a typical German reserve. The first thing he did was question my brother and me in German; questions which we did not understand and could not answer. We had picked up a few words here and there from our mother, but not nearly enough to carry on a conversation. The school administrator just shook his head and made notes in a large book. Mother had brought with her our year-end reports from our school in Telsiai, and after a lengthy conversation with the administrator, she informed us of the grades we were assigned to, starting immediately. In addition, the administrator recommended that we hire a German language tutor, giving us his name and the fact that he was a middle school student. Siegfried would know how to find him.

Nervous does not begin to describe how I felt walking into my classroom for the first time. The class was already in session and I was shown to my seat. The teacher, without my understanding a word he said, introduced me to the class. I knew they were talking about us because the teacher, an older man with a limp, sketched a map of Europe on the blackboard and pointed to *Litauen*, which I recognized, but it was smaller than I had pictured in my mind. He then resumed teaching or lecturing where he had left off and I could not even guess at the name of the subject. Siegfried took me in tow and passed on to me the schedule of classes that the teacher had given him, knowing that Siegfried was my so-called host and guardian.

I really thought the day would never end. Between

classes I was either ignored or pointed to by other kids, including some girls, and I could not decide which was worse. As we were finally headed home, I asked my brother: "How did things go for you?"

"I don't like it," he said. "I wish I could join the army, if only I was old enough. They look at me and treat me like a dummy; I'm just as smart as any of them, I just don't know German."

He knew that army thing was not going to happen. At least three more years and the war would be over anyway. We told of our struggle to get through our day to our parents and aunts. Aunt Antanina was most sympathetic and I could tell she was genuinely sad for our plight. Mother and Father however were not nearly as charitable, telling us that this was temporary and that we needed to be patient. Once we learned enough of the language, things would improve and we would enjoy the benefits of a second language. This was hard to swallow but there was no other choice and I decided to heed their words.

As it turned out, they were prophetic. In the arithmetic class, the teacher singled me out and holding up his fingers he asked me: "*Vie viel?*" (How many?)

"*Drei,*" I replied, "*Sieben, Acht,*" however many he held up, I knew the numbers in German and there was nothing wrong with my eyesight. The teacher would have all students stand up and would present a problem in arithmetic on the blackboard. The very first student to solve it on their slate board would be permitted to sit down. This went on until a single student was left standing. Me. I was very frustrated because I had known the answer to the problem soon after it was presented, but I could not solve it and then translate the solution to the German language before some kid popped the answer. It was not long, however, before I was not the last standing and not much later half the class was left standing

while I took my seat.

Slate tablets, approximately the size of a notebook page, were used extensively by all students. It was the main implement for taking notes and solving problems. A chalk-like stick was tied to it with a string and used as a pencil. Erasing was easy, similar to a blackboard, and it could be used over and over again, saving paper in the process. It took some time to get used to it, but my brother took to it like a duck to water. He liked sketching and drawing and other students would look over his shoulder at things and people Arutis drew on his slate.

Each class would start with the teacher entering the room and the kids jumping to their feet, same as back home. Here, however the difference was that he would shout: "*Heil Hitler!*" and the students would shoot their right arm into the air and loudly reply: "*Sieg Heil!*" Each classroom, on its wall facing the students, displayed a large portrait of the Leader with other Nazi symbols surrounding it. Hitler's eyes followed our every move in the classroom. Just as the communists venerated Stalin, the Germans appeared to worship Adolph Hitler, the builder of the thousand years Reich. I also saluted Hitler with the other students, afraid to find out what would happen to me if I didn't.

Hitler's influence did not end only at the start of the class. As far as I knew, all the boys in our school belonged to the Hitler Youth organization, which seemed to be some kind of military organization; a junior army. On certain days all boys wore their Hitler Youth uniforms with insignia and rank designation. On those days my brother and I stood out like sore thumbs in our civilian outfits. We were somewhat used to being different because of our language and perhaps our demeanor, but on uniform days it was made very clear to us that we did not belong. So it was a surprise one day that either out of pity, certainly on someone's orders, Siegfried

took my brother and me to their headquarters and each of us was presented with a heavy black shirt and bloused black pants – Hitler Youth uniforms, only without insignia. To us it signaled some kind of acceptance and it made our lives just a bit easier. There was no talk of us becoming members because you had to be a German to qualify.

Chapter 12

The End of 1944

Father worked in a factory. For twelve hours each day, six days per week, he stood at some sort of machine, loaded it, started and monitored the process until the piece was finished. Then he started the process all over again with a new piece. He told us that it was not very hard work, but he had to be watchful and alert at all times and to meet the norm of pieces produced, which he said was not very difficult to do. Being on his feet all day was the worst part; his meal break lasted 45 minutes and there were short breaks for toilet needs. He ate in the factory cafeteria. Except for the small size of portions, he had no complaints about the food. In fact, on Saturday, he was permitted to bring his immediate family to the cafeteria and treat us to a meal. The food wasn't bad, except for the soup, which to me tasted funny. Another of his complaints was that there was no one else he could talk to.

Aunt Vincenta was in her element. From the first day, she was able to fulfill her work norm and on occasion could assist other women in meeting theirs, who were not as skilled as she. Furthermore, there were a number of other foreign workers with whom she could communicate in Polish or

Russian. No one else was from Lithuania, but at least half of the work force was from Slavic countries and spoke some Russian or Polish. Aunt Vincenta's working hours also were twelve hours per day, Monday through Saturday. All of us could not wait for Sunday, the day off from work and school.

Toward the end of our first week in Kamenz, looking ahead to Sunday and planning on going to church, Father became frantic: he could not find his good suit, his only suit. Both he and my mother remembered packing it. Everything we owned was unpacked and examined at least twice. No suit! This mad search revealed that one of our suitcases was missing. We remembered unloading it from our train in Dresden. It must have been on the bus to Kamenz; it was possible that as tired as we were at that time, we had overlooked it and left it there. If so, perhaps the local refugee office may have some knowledge of it.

Our landlady knew where this office was located and gave my mother directions how to get there. It was a long walk and she did not feel well so she designated me, my father and Arutis to go there and see if we could locate the suitcase. My mother wrote a note in German to explain what we were looking for and described the item well enough to establish our ownership. For us she phonetically spelled out the initials of the organization: N S Fau, in case we had to inquire of its location. We found the described area and there were numerous signs for various organizations, but no N S Fau. It was late, there weren't other people we could ask and frustration began to set in. Finally my brother spoke up: "There is a small sign, it says NSV. Let's see if they can tell us where this Fau can be found. Wait a minute!" Arutis said, "I just thought of it; the letter 'V' in German is pronounced Fau, as in their flying bomb V-1, *Fau Einz*."

We had found it! And as miracles sometimes happen, our suitcase was there with Father's English, pre-war suit in

it! I had not seen our father so happy in a very long time. We were practically dancing on the way home.

Father, in his dark English suit and white shirt with a tie, took all of us to church that Sunday. The local population in Saxony is Lutheran Protestant and there were no Catholic churches in our vicinity. Father said a church is a church; we have always gone to pray on Sunday and we would continue to do so here. We knew it would be a strange experience because we did not know their customs or language and we hoped that we would not stick out as ignorant foreigners, which is what we were.

Their service schedule for Sunday was posted on a board in front of the church and we chose the 9:30 time to enter, with a few minutes to spare. There was not much time to gaze around; I was impressed by the stained glass windows. By the start of the service the church was nearly full; the organ started up and the congregation sang while standing. We tried to blend in as much as possible, our mother alone could follow the words of the sermon and when the services were over I was glad that we had attended.

That afternoon we met our German language tutor. Manfred was slim and fairly tall for a 16-year-old. Siegfried introduced us and left, our mother stayed for a while working out the details of this arrangement. It turned out that Manfred was related to our school administrator. Payment for his services were discussed, which turned out to be quite modest and as soon as mother left us, he began: Pointing to an object he would say: "*Was ist das?*" he asked, touching a window.

"*Das ist ein Fenster,*" we would reply. If we did not know the object we would shake our head and he would point again and tell us what it was and he would make us repeat it. It went well and soon he ran out of objects in the room to point to. He then opened his school backpack and

pulled out illustrated children's books as well as some texts on geography and illustrated history. With these aids, he continued to point, ask and explain. He was well prepared and I felt like I was making progress in my German vocabulary. At about 4:00 in the afternoon he stopped and said something we did not understand. We called our mother and Manfred told her that at this time of the day on Sunday he and his family have tea and would my mother be so kind as to make enough for the three of us as would we join him. We would with pleasure.

The war news was not good. Our landlady would invite our mother to listen to the news on radio. On the eastern front, the Russians had penetrated the German border in several places and were advancing through Poland. There was fierce fighting in Latvia where the Germans and the Latvians were surrounded on three sides with the Gulf of Riga to their backs but refused to surrender. Out west, Paris and most of France was lost to the Germans and now the talk was of holding off the allies at the West Wall, whatever that was. We could see the concern on the faces of our hosts hearing the news, but at no time did they express any desire to leave their home. Our family, on the other hand, would listen to the news and track the map very closely.

The following Saturday afternoon after school, my brother, Siegfried and I were walking toward home when a group of men, five or six, passed us. They were dressed partly in uniforms I did not recognize and partly in civilian attire and speaking some foreign language. I was curious to enough to ask Siegfried who they may be: "*Wer sind diese Leute?*" I managed to string out this short sentence.

"*Franzoesen, Englander... Flieger...*" he replied,

speaking rapidly. I managed to snag the first few words and I believed he told us that they were French and English airmen. Of course they had to be prisoners of war from that compound at the far end of the main street. What surprised me was the fact that they were unescorted by armed guards, which is what I had expected from all I had seen in the past. We learned more about them the following week from a shoe repair man who himself had been a prisoner of war, taken early in the war.

All of our shoes had taken a beating, even before our journey west, but now the soles and the heels were in a bad shape. Our landlady had suggested that in back of a former bicycle shop there was a shoe repair man, a foreigner like us, and we could have heels and soles put on our worn footwear at a reasonable cost. Yes, ration coupons were needed to buy the materials, but he was resourceful and might be able to help us.

He was located a few blocks from our house and to my father's surprise he spoke Polish. He was Polish. Before attending to my father's boots, he related his story of being captured by the Germans in September of 1939. His name was Pawel and he, with thousands of his fellow prisoners, was sent to a work camp in Silesia, to work in a rock quarry. Before the war, he had apprenticed as a shoemaker in his uncle's shop and his skill was soon recognized. After a year in the camp, he was taken out and the Germans set him up in his own little shop in a nearby town for their own and their families' needs.

Pawel was very happy to be able to speak to anyone in his native language and his eyes lit up when our father pulled out his pouch of homemade tobacco and offered him a pinch together with the paper to roll it in. Smoking was Pawel's serious addiction and that turned out to our benefit. His ration allowed for thirty cigarettes per month and by

necessity he limited himself to one a day, one puff at a time. He showed us his ashtray – in it was a half smoked cigarette, half gone at midday. A deal was soon struck: We could forget about the shoe sole and heel rations and for a small bagful of my father's finest he would fix all of our shoes. His normal charge would apply, but our shoes would be a priority.

We asked Pawel about the war prisoners walking the city streets without an armed escort. "They work in a factory during the day," Pawel said. "At night they must stay in the compound and are guarded, but they have been given parole and there is nowhere to escape to. In some ways they are better off; they receive Red Cross packages on a regular basis, their work is easy and they know war will end soon and they will be able to go home."

Pawel was in a similar situation himself as a prisoner of war with a parole, but you could see he was wistful about the Red Cross cigarettes he was not getting. He seemed like very likable young man, caught up in circumstances completely out of his control. Also he was very concerned as to what kind of treatment he would receive from his Russian liberators if they managed to get this far. In many ways he reminded us of another young Pole, a Junior Lieutenant who had escaped the Russians when Poland was partitioned in 1939. He had made his way to Telsiai and lived with us for nearly a month, plotting how to get to Sweden. We had no idea if he ever made it; Swedes were not particularly welcoming to refugees even if he had managed to cross the Baltic Sea somehow. At least he had evaded the fate of his brother officers in Katyn Forest, but who knew for how long.

Pawel was sad to see us go and we promised to come back soon with more work.

The weather turned colder and by mid-November, there was frost on the ground and the trees were bare. The only heat in our apartment was from a wood/coal-burning stove in the small living room. None of the bedrooms in the entire house were heated; evidently a German custom and they claimed it was healthier that way. Perhaps, but going to bed at night in a room where you could see your breath was not pleasant, nor was it that great getting out from under the covers in the morning. They said we would get used to it, but we improvised. Before going to bed, we would fill a bottle with hot water and place it in bed. About twenty minutes later the chill was off and you could huddle in the warm spot.

Something new and unseen for us before was the local women, mostly young, wearing slacks or pants out in the streets. The war was blamed for this dramatic change in women's fashions, but you could not deny the practicality of it in the winter, given the lack of availability of silk or even wool stockings. Our aunts and mother were excited about that prospect, especially Vincenta, who had to trudge to work early in the morning on foot and her stockings could not handle much more darning. She talked about that constantly but we could see that she was too nervous to take that step at her age. Aunt Antanina would not even consider such a change and our mother was tempted for practical reasons but reluctant by tradition. There also was the practical side: where would we get the fabric to sew them?

We carried on in our routine of school, work, church on Sunday and lessons in the afternoon into December. Manfred told us that he liked to ski and he planned to go to Dresden to buy a pair for himself because he had outgrown the junior skis he was given when he was ten. He asked if we would like to go with him and of course we said yes, but there was the little matter of permission from our parents. They said they would think about it and let us know. For his own

reasons, Manfred postponed that trip to Dresden until after Christmas. Our parent's decision would also wait.

Christmas is a big holiday in the Protestant/Lutheran Germany; at least as big as in Roman Catholic Lithuania. We could sense the excitement of the children and the hustle and bustle by the local adults carrying Christmas trees into their homes. More people were in the streets with shopping baskets and mesh bags, spending their saved-up ration coupons on food and whatever clothing items were available. Our hosts put up a decorated Christmas tree in their own living room and invited us in the afternoon of the day before Christmas to see them light the candle decorations and to listen to Christmas music on their radio. We were grateful for their generosity and reciprocated by parting with some of the last remaining smoked pork we had managed to bring with us.

Our Christmas Eve supper was nothing like in the past. No straw on the table and you can forget about twelve non-meat dishes. Aunt Antanina had saved and brought holy wafers that had been blessed at the cathedral in Telsiai and breaking and sharing this holy bread brought the adults to tears. After saying grace and thanking the Lord for our safety, we promised each other to spend the next Christmas at home. The food on our table included two kinds of breads, cheese and jam and a small portion of herring. Mother fried some potato pancakes and we ate them with sprinkled sugar on top. There were no fruit drinks but lemon soda, called Citro, was readily available without ration coupons turned out to be a pleasant substitute. The adults drank tea and we all reminisced of Christmas past, tables groaning with great food and cold, crisp snowy nights for attending the midnight mass.

There was no midnight service at the Lutheran church, but we were there early for our customary 9:30 service. The church was crowded, standing room only, with

the locals dressed in their finest for this holiday. Several people nodded to us, wishing ‘*Froeliche Weinachten.*’ This was a very nice gesture on their part and we reciprocated, pronouncing it badly, except for our mother. Evidently they had seen us there on past Sundays, or perhaps recognized father from work. This holiday was not nearly the same as at home, but it felt like Christmas nonetheless. There was no work for Father or Aunt Vincenta on the following day and for us the school was out until after the New Year.

Chapter 13

1945, A Winter to Remember

The New Year holiday was uneventful for us. Having free time, we were invited to our hosts' living room to listen to the news on radio. Mother would translate whenever something significant was said. The propaganda minister Goebels himself spoke on the occasion of entering 1945 and as he ranted on and on of the victories to come, the significant news was on the western front where the Germans had made a breakthrough in Belgium and were driving toward Antwerp. Newly formed armor and infantry divisions were on the offensive and would change the course of the war, we were told. Little was said about the front in the east and to us that to us was also significant: no gain and likely losses in territory.

My parents were puzzled and my mother questioned our hosts about what possible reasons the Germans would concentrate their power in the west, rather than trying to stop the barbarians already inside their borders in the east. The host -- we did not think he was a Nazi -- had been so overwhelmingly indoctrinated in Hitler's infallibility that he would not even consider questioning the decisions made in Berlin.

"Don't worry," he said. "The *Fuerer* knows what he is

doing. The Russians' turn will come when they least expect it."

We desperately wanted to believe his words.

Towards the middle of January, Manfred decided to go to Dresden for his skis. Our parents consented and on the last Sunday in January, early in the morning, the three of us boarded a train to the capital of Saxony. The weather had turned mild for January and we teased Manfred that he would be skiing on the grass. Our destination was the main station, the *Hauptbahnhof*, located near the center of the city. Dresden was a beautiful city, virtually untouched by bombing. Throughout at least four years of raining bombs on German cities, Dresden had experienced numerous air raid warnings, daily during the past year, and all but a few were false alarms. In fact, one had sounded just before our arrival, but as in many times in the past the airplanes flew over leaving only their contrails in the sky above us. The few times bombs had fallen, it was as if by mistake and damage had been limited.

Dresden was the center of cultural life, with museums, libraries and art galleries. Perhaps due to the absence of strategic and industrial targets the allies had bypassed it. We walked through most of the city center marveling at the architecture on a scale my brother and I had never seen before. We thought of Klaipeda as a big city, but Dresden was in a class by itself.

Manfred had been there before and knew the streets. He took us on a tour of the city because he was very proud of it and was happy to show it to us. He would point to the more interesting buildings, parks and bridges over the Elbe and do his best to explain to us their history and significance. We did our best to understand him and would ask questions that would have annoyed a less patient person. He knew where to find the store that carried skis but he was not in a hurry to get there, instead he acted like a tour guide for us and the three of us enjoyed the mild weather in these

beautiful surroundings.

After a late lunch on a park bench, consisting of sandwiches that our mother had prepared for the three of us, and washed down with Citro, we found the ski store.

Manfried was picky but the choices were limited. The important thing was that the skis and the ski poles were sized for him correctly. The store clerk bound them up in a bundle and our host carried it happily back to the train station. Our train left on time and we were back in Kamenz in less than 45 minutes, with two short stops in between. By suppertime we were telling our parents and our aunts of the wondrous things we had seen and done on that sunny Sunday.

By late January we were talking of moving west once again. The war was going badly for the Germans; their offensive in Belgium had broken down and their newly formed divisions were smashed and retreating. In the east, the Russians seemed unstoppable and as we looked at the map of Europe it was evident that the Russians would get to Kamenz before the western allies; we could not stay here.

Mother started to get the necessary travel permits and other documentation and once again railway was our means of escape. By studying the map, the destination our parents chose was Kempten, a small city near the Swiss border. The reasoning was that maybe, just maybe, we could get into neutral Switzerland. If not, the western allies were a lot closer there than the Russians. Once again my mother's ability to speak German and my father's carefully nurtured stash of tobacco helped expedite our move scheduled in about two weeks.

In mid-February, my brother woke me up in the middle of the night. It was fairly light in our room and I thought that I had overslept. The clock read 2:15.

"What's going on, why is everyone awake?" I asked.

"Dresden is on fire, take a look," he replied and took

me to the window in the living room.

My parents and aunts stood there transfixed. There was light in the room even though the electricity was off. The sky was all lit up in the direction of Dresden. We could see people in the street, wandering around, gazing at the sky and whispering to each other.

I had been asleep when the air raid siren went off. Alarms had been a fairly frequent occurrence; they were precautionary because the British bombers flew at night, but no one in Kamenz, a small city, was overly concerned. This one was different. The number of bombers had been much larger than in the past. Even though we could not see them, their rumble and roar was unprecedented. Wave after wave they kept coming, as if circling, but we knew that could not be. It was their sheer numbers that scared everyone. If there was anti-aircraft fire we could not see or hear it. Then the sky lit up and stayed lit, reflections from the clouds getting brighter, before dawn finally appeared to extinguish it.

No one went to work the following day. Our street was filled with refugees, bombing victims who had managed to escape from the edge of the firestorm. They were pushing baby buggies loaded with their possessions, walking as if in a daze. The refugee organization was overwhelmed and the citizens pitched in with food and shelter to those who had no relatives anywhere else and no place to go. The blood drive was on with renewed energy and people responded.

At mid-morning, air raid sirens sounded and this time people heeded their call by seeking shelter in the designated areas. Soon the sky was filled once again with silver bombers and their contrails dimmed the sun. A deep rumble followed; Dresden was being pounded again, this time by the Americans.

The stories, as told by the refugees, defied belief. They spoke of burning streets; asphalt as well as paving

stones. Concrete and brick buildings going up in flames like matches. People, their clothes on fire, were jumping into the half frozen Elbe River. The winds at times howling in the street were so fierce that they sucked up the oxygen and people, not injured otherwise, suffocated and died. This was all coming secondhand to us through our mother and after a while she broke down and could no longer translate. We were all stunned into silence. Dresden radio stations did not broadcast and the news from Berlin confirmed that Dresden had been bombed and thousands had died. The injured and those made insane and homeless were beyond counting. Someone was guarding us. Our chosen destination back in October had been Dresden. Only fate intervened by work requiring my father and my aunt to perform it in Kamenz. We wondered about the people who had traveled with us from Klaipeda and stayed in Dresden. They had been so pleased to remain in this oasis of culture and tranquility among the surrounding ruins of large cities.

The following night, the bombing of Dresden resumed. What was left afterward and whoever ventured to look for victims among the smoking ruins was pestered again by the heavy bombers. The question that would never be answered, not even by those who ordered the bombers' crews and gave them maps to Dresden, was why? Why now, when the war was nearly over and Dresden had no military targets? Why now, when they knew the city had embraced thousands of refugees? Why now, when the civilian population had been totally terrorized and cowed by past firestorms in Hamburg, by the devastation of Berlin and virtually every other large city? Make no mistake, evil exists and it is busy.

Chapter 14

Bavaria

A week after the horrible events in Dresden, we were packed and ready to board a train. We had grown fond of our hosts and Siegfried had become a friend. Manfred also came to say goodbye and presented us with a paper airplane that he had made after we had taught him how to do it right. We were sure he was destined to be a teacher and we hoped that we had measured up as his first students.

We boarded a train to Ulm by way of Nuremberg. From Ulm we were to take another train to Kempten. Our very first stop by necessity was Dresden, where some of the main rail lines that lead to Nuremberg and on to the south west of Germany had already been repaired. Going to and from Dresden, the train went at a very slow pace; we assumed that the engineer feared obstacles and damage to the track that had not yet been assessed or possibly overlooked by repair crews. The sight that met us that late afternoon had to rival Dante's worst nightmare. The center of the city where we had shopped for skis just weeks before was one continuous ruin. There was not one building left standing. Occasionally a stone or brick chimney would poke out of the nowhere. Streets were not recognizable as such; as far as the

eye could see from our side of the wagon Dresden had become a wasteland, a field of ash and rubble; the devil's own playground after the fires had gone out. I was glad when our train finally rolled into the countryside and we no longer saw the devastation.

To me, even today, it seems like a miracle that trains in Germany ran and carried passengers in February of 1945. Even at night, which was by far safer than in daylight, our train would stop and wait for the all clear and then continue on. During the day we lost count of how many times we had to stop outside the rail yards wait out an air raid or detour around damaged tracks. The stops at the scheduled stations were welcome breaks because most of them had soup kitchens and we could get soup and bread and, on occasion, potato salad. There was order in the chaos that was caused by countless thousands of refugees making their way west largely thanks to the German Red Cross and other welfare organizations. Slowly we were making our way to Kempten.

Somewhere near Nuremberg I saw a certain sign that Germany had been defeated. In one of the rail yards where we waited out another delay, a number of flatcars were lined up carrying Germany's latest tanks. From magazine pictures I recognized them as Tigers, with long cannon barrels supported in the middle, probably their famous 88's. They looked factory new and I counted at least a dozen of them, two per flatcar. What shocked me and made me conclude that they could not possibly win the war was the fact that each tank in its rear carried a boiler. True, the boiler had its own armor on the sides, but a woodburning boiler that somehow must have been adapted to their diesel engines!

We all were familiar with these boilers because during the past year or more due to fuel shortage most medium trucks in Germany had been equipped with such boilers. Small chunks of wood, lots of them, were fed into the round

metal cylinder as tall as a grown man, which stood just to the rear of the driver's door. After burning for a while the gasses resulting from the fire would crank the engine and the truck would be off in a cloud of smoke. The trucks that we saw ran their engines continuously because a cold start, from the time you lit the boiler to the start of the engine, was 15-20 minutes or longer. The wood could only be fed into the cylinder from the outside. To see this on a fighting machine like a Tiger tank was to witness desperation that bordered on insanity. And yet you had to admire German ingenuity.

In Ulm I experienced real fear that our family might become separated. Watching out for each other constantly and keeping an eye on our belongings – at the same time in a station filled with humanity in motion, elbow to elbow – was as stressful as anything I had experienced. Perhaps the lack of sleep and constant hunger was contributing to my dread, but it was evident that everyone else in our family was experiencing this apprehension. There was an approximately three-hour wait before the departure of our train to Kempten and we finally settled down on a platform, huddled tightly for warmth and safety. I might have fallen asleep, and the next thing I knew the train was moving. Packed with people and luggage as usual, we had managed to stay together, hopefully with all of our belongings intact.

None of us had ever seen mountains before. We were told that Kempten was at the foothills of the Alps, the tallest mountains in Europe, and my brother and I crowded the window long before our destination to see which one of us would be the first to spot them. After many false alarms, mostly mistaking clouds for mountains, when we finally were close to Kempten, there they were, in the far distance reaching for the sky. What a sight! We speculated on our chances of staying there, waiting out the war, and what it would be like to hike and climb to some of those peaks.

Reality, however, was about to intrude on us.

At the train station in Kempten and later in the city itself, we came to the realization that half the refugees in Europe had entertained the same notion as us: Shelter in neutral Switzerland. Not only was the border shut tight and no one was getting through, but the city of Kempten and its surroundings were totally full with earlier arrivals. There was no room at any of the designated shelters or anywhere else; we had not made any other plan and we were now stuck at the mercy of the refugee organization. They would decide for us where we would stay.

Overnight they put us up in a temporary shelter in Kempten. The following day, two trucks, covered with canvas, their boilers fired up, came to pick us up. About twenty people fit in each truck with their belongings. We left Kempten and were on a highway going north, according to an occasional road sign, toward Augsburg. This old city, named after some Roman emperor turned out to be only a temporary destination. Our two-truck convoy continued into the countryside with periodic stops to add wood to the boiler. None of our fellow travelers/refugees was Lithuanian. As nearly as we could tell they were Latvians and an Estonian family with a baby. Our parents managed to converse with the older people in Russian.

Late in the afternoon, our trucks stopped in the middle of a small farm town called Kuenhausen. Could this be it? At a glance, the town's population probably could be counted in low double digits. A typical Bavarian farm village on a road that curved right in the middle of it, with houses fronting the road and barns and animal pens, along with other farm buildings, in back of them.

Where the trucks had come to a stop was a larger, two-story building, which would be our home. On the second floor there was a former hall for town meetings and most

likely festive occasions like weddings. For the most part it was just one large, “L” shaped room with the small “L” part probably having served as an office. The building belonged to the largest landowner and the mayor of the village. He and his extended family lived on the first floor, and the entrance and stairs leading to second floor were enclosed in the middle of the building.

Our home on the second floor consisted of a number of wooden tables and benches with a few scattered chairs here and there. A large, wood-fired stove sat in the middle of the room. Near the former office was a large cookstove with a baking oven, also wood-fired. It did not appear to have been used recently. There were a few windows facing the street. No beds. We had to make our own and because of the limited space they all would be double bunk beds. Lumber and tools were provided, and with a local carpenter and his helper leading and supervising the work, the bed frames were done before nightfall. We all pitched in to bring straw that our landlord had donated and the women proceeded to make up the beds with whatever sheets and blankets we had brought. Other blankets were hung between the bunk beds for privacy. The Estonian family, because of the baby and two other toddlers, took possession of the semi-private former office.

My brother and I shared the upper bunk; our parents took the bottom. Our aunts had adjoining single bunks and using spare sheets and blankets we claimed privacy for our family. Wood for heating and cooking was available but we had to saw and chop logs for proper firewood. The first time we lit the cooking stove we filled the room with smoke. Someone had stuffed rags in the stovepipe and once they were removed the stove functioned. The problem was that none of us had anything to cook; we could boil water in pots the landlord provided. Our family as well as some of the

others did have some tea, but that was it for the night. No sugar. In spite of the hunger it felt great to be able to stretch out on a straw bed without train noises, frequent document checks and strangers elbowing us. We slept surprisingly well.

Food was the first priority and the nearest government shop was in Poettmes, a larger town about four kilometers away. The way to get there was on foot. So in the morning my parents and Arutis set out to find food and to learn more about our surroundings. One of the Latvian mothers went with them. I stayed in our new home with my aunts who were busy unpacking and getting acquainted with our roommates.

The common language for adults was Russian. There weren't many kids my age, mostly Latvian girls. The Estonian boy and girl were much younger and they had a baby sister less than a year old. I tried my limited German on the Latvians without success. The Latvian language is similar to Lithuanian and it did not take me that long to learn and use some common words. There was another Latvian family, a mother and two older girls, the younger one appeared to have an injured foot.

As far as languages went, the small but useful amount of German I had learned during the past months did not help me to understand the local Bavarians. Their dialect was incomprehensible to me. They understood me when I spoke, but their replies could have been in Bulgarian. Our mother did better, but even she had a difficulty communicating with our landlord and his wife, often asking them to repeat themselves. Perhaps it was for the best that even the language was a barrier between us. These farmers resented our presence in their house, as if we had come here of our own free will, and they assumed no part of responsibility for the events leading to the war and the war itself that had brought us to their sad village.

We had food! My parents were back carrying net bags. It was not in abundance but there was bread and a bit of margarine, flour and potatoes and a written order from the local government for the farmers in Kuenhausen to supply a half liter of milk per day to children younger than fourteen years of age. Our mother had arranged that. Our landlord was livid with rage that as a mayor he would be responsible for implementing this order with his neighbors and he'd also have to share his food with these damn foreigners. War can be so brutal and unforgiving.

Chapter 15

Spring of 1945

March had come and the days were noticeably longer and warmer. We played outside as much as we could to avoid our cramped quarters. Beyond the farm's animal pens was a meadow and, less than a half kilometer beyond, a mature pine forest was easily accessible. We would play hide and seek with the Latvian girls and, when we became bored with that, Arutis and I would search out the thickest, largest piece of pine tree bark and carve a boat out of it. I loved the brown, layered texture of the bark; we would cut and shave a stick for a mast and attach a paper sail to float it in a nearby pond.

Tragedy struck about two weeks after we had moved in to Kuenhausen. My parents and Arutis had gone to Poettmes for food, which was becoming more and more difficult to obtain. They were stopped there by a civilian and several uniformed men, most likely military police, and were asked to produce their documents. This was not unusual because the army was always looking for deserters. This time, however, they ordered Father to come with them. My mother's pleas did no good. She was told that all men below the age of 60 and older than 16 who were not in uniform were to be pressed into work battalions to perform whatever

labor was needed to performed. No exceptions, no exemptions would be accepted. He was led to what appeared to be a government office, where a small group of men were standing near the front entrance guarded by an armed soldier.

My mother and Arutis came back in tears and explained what had happened. We were devastated and the other men in our group were visibly nervous. Children clung to their fathers. Mother's story served to warn the other men to stay out of the city and be out of sight if the search party ever descended on this village. This was the worst day of our lives. All that we could do was pray that he would be safe. Both of our aunts were inconsolable, only Mother trusted the Almighty to keep him from harm and have him come back to us.

The only personal items in Father's possession were what he had taken with him for the short trip to Poettmes. Not even a change of socks or underwear. We had seen and heard of these work battalions in the east; they were used mostly to build defensive fortifications for the army and usually the workers were out of harm's way by the start of the battle. There would not be any possibility whatsoever to contact him. We could only speculate what fate had in store for him, and place our trust in God.

I don't think any of us slept that night. Beyond the concern we had for Father, we were now being attacked by head lice. They are tiny but with the sharpest teeth and the pain of their bite is out of proportion to their size. They spread from person to person and in our tight quarters there was no escape for anyone. In the morning, we heated water on the cooking stove and used laundry soap to wash our hair. This brought only a temporary relief, because there were always survivors hiding in clothing and other parts of our bodies and our best efforts to get rid of them would only bring a standoff. In addition to the lice problem, most of the kids had come down with colds. The Estonian family was hit

the hardest; all three of their children had fever and the baby developed a cough. There was no doctor in the village.

By the middle of March the food situation had become critical. The food stores in Poettmes were empty and our coupons were worthless. By then our only food consisted of a baked potato in its skin, salt and unsweetened tea. The potatoes came from our host's stock in his cellar and we bartered for them with our remaining tobacco. Part of my and my brother's food problem was solved from an unexpected source: One day an old farmer, not from our village, found us playing in the woods. He motioned for us to come with him and we figured what's to lose. He took us to an adjoining wood and pointed out trees that he had marked with paint. Using our best German as well as sign language we concluded that he wanted us to cut those trees down. Then he pointed to us, then to his mouth and said "*Essen.*" That we understood.

Next morning, after a long lecture by our mother, who had no idea whatsoever where her husband was and did not relish the idea of not seeing her children for a day, we met the farmer at the edge of his forest. He carried a long saw with handles at each end, a bag of sandwiches, a file for sharpening the saw, a small axe and two bottles filled with drinking water. He indicated that he would be back before sundown, but stayed with us to monitor our first steps with the saw. It was not hard and Arutis and I got the hang of it fairly quickly. Don't push the saw, pull it when Arutis stops pulling; don't force or press it and the saw does most of the work. Pine is relatively soft and we just had to be careful where the tree fell. The farmer had shown us how to determine the approximate direction we wanted the tree to fall and instructed us by pointing that we should cut the tree as low as possible.

By what we thought was noon we had killed a half

dozen trees, had drunk most of the water and had blisters on our hands that brought tears to my eyes just looking at them. We stopped to eat the sandwiches and, because the weather was mild, we used our socks as gloves for handling the saw the rest of the day. We took what we estimated a half hour break and lay down on the pine needle beds to watch the sky. Lately there had been a considerable increase in airplane activity, as evidenced by the crisscrossing of contrails over our heads. The blisters on our hands probably slowed us down in the afternoon but the time went by quickly. As promised the farmer was back; he seemed pleased with the results of our work and, picking up our tools, we followed him to his house. His farm was not part of any village and stood by itself, much like farms back in Lithuania. After washing up we were seated at a kitchen table and his wife, a pleasant looking lady, served us. No other family members were present; we suspected that they were in uniform somewhere else.

She served us soup that had meat and potatoes in it, and homemade bread on the side. The second course was dumplings, also meat filled. That was the best meal I'd had since we left our home in Lithuania. I suspect that this also was a special meal for the farmers and I did not think anyone ate like that every day in wartime. Dessert was some kind of pudding that was very sweet. After our meal, we thanked the old farmers, excused ourselves and before leaving we asked if we could take the leftover bread from the soup course with us. The farmer's wife wrapped it brown paper and handed it to me as we were leaving.

It was dark by the time we returned. So much to tell our mother and our aunts! They were visibly relieved that we were back and in good spirits, relaying our day's events to the Latvian neighbors, especially the details of the supper we had eaten. Sore, tired and blistered – and yet we could not wait to

get back to the woods the next day.

That night and the following morning we could hear a terrible coughing and wheezing sound coming from the Estonian family's corner. The parents were frantic, suspecting that their baby had the whooping cough. There was no doctor available; the baby's temperature was extremely high and the parents' efforts to reduce her fever with cold baths were to no avail. Arutis and I left for work with heavy hearts for the Estonian family.

Our day in the woods was a repeat of the previous day. Trees fell; we looked and found others that had been marked, ate the black bread and sausage sandwiches at lunchtime and dined like kings in the evening.

Long teary faces greeted us upon our return. The little Estonian baby girl had died that afternoon. The parents' grief was profound but, in a typical Estonian fashion, they grieved silently. Only their eyes revealed the sorrow they felt and they consoled themselves with their other two children who had somewhat recovered from their illnesses. All of us expressed our condolences and offered to help with the funeral.

The Estonians were Lutherans but accepted the Mayor's offer to bring a priest from Poettmes. The Bavarians are Roman Catholics and the villagers of Kuenhausen worshipped in a church in Poettmes. As small as the village was, they did have their own cemetery at the edge of their village. And so two days after the baby girl died, a priest dressed in his vestments led the small procession from our temporary home to the cemetery. The parents took turns carrying the tiny coffin in their arms. Their children walked immediately behind them and the rest of us followed. Some of the villagers took off their hats as the procession passed them but none joined us. Tears and prayers in three languages accompanied the baby girl as her coffin was lowered into the ground. A few early spring blossoms were tossed on to the

coffin. For her parents, their grief was beyond any measure. For me that was one more debt that I swore the communists were responsible for and someday accounts would need to be settled.

Two days later, as my brother and I returned from supper at the farm, we climbed the stairs and there was our father! He was back, tired and muddy, his boots off, his feet in a bucket of warm water but he was back!

“I told you someone is watching over us,” I yelled to my brother. “I told you!”

Our family’s joy was shared by our entire refugee community. Questions poured out from all sides: Where had he been and how did he manage to leave the work gang and come back to Kuenhausen? The story he told us was astonishing: *“On the same day we had been rounded up, I and five other men were loaded into the back of a truck with one armed soldier who kept everyone’s personal documents, and were driven from Poettmes to an adjoining town where three additional men were added to our group. No one spoke and I did not say anything, not wanting to reveal myself as a foreigner. We continued north and by nightfall we found ourselves near the city of Neuburg/Donau. An air raid made us stop; everyone jumped out of the truck and took shelter in a nearby ditch. I took a chance and moved further from the truck, which I thought could be a target. This air raid turned out to be one for the books in intensity and duration. Either by intent or an accident, our truck had come to stop near a tall metal fence, which enclosed an airfield. This clearly was no ordinary airfield; this one must have been the home of the new jet fighter/ bomber aircraft we had heard so much about; a very high value target for the allied bombers.*

“The first allied aircraft dropped flares, which lit up the entire airfield. The bombers followed, covered by fighter planes, and unloaded

on the buildings and revetments housing the aircraft. The ground shook beneath me so much that I actually bounced in the ditch. I had gone deaf in the first minutes of the raid. The heavy bombing continued and new waves of bombers released more flares and more bombs. This went on for several hours and, when it seemed that the worst was over, the fighter planes descended and strafed, making low level passes at anything that moved. Sometime during the night I must have passed out from shock and fear. If an all-clear alarm had been sounded I would not have heard it anyway. Just before dawn there was a lull in the raid and I got up to look around to see if anyone else from our truck was alive.

“The truck I came in on was all shot up, tires shredded and holes in the cab and canvas cover. It didn’t explode probably because the boiler had been depleted and there was no other fuel in the vehicle. Our guard was gone and I did not see any of the other men from our group. Before I could look further, I saw another wave of bombers heading toward me and the airfield and I dove back into the ditch. This time the sticks of bombs raked the runways. This went on for hours, but I could not be sure. When the last airplane flew off, the airport runways resembled newly plowed earth and there were no buildings in sight. After a futile search of the shot-up truck for my documents, I stayed in the ditch until dusk, gathering my thoughts and trying to recall the route the truck had taken.

“I had to walk at night for fear of being seen by an army or police patrol. Without documents, I would have been taken as a deserter and probably shot. I was fortunate to have found a few turnips near the road that most likely had fallen from a truck and drank water from animal watering troughs in farms along the way. I stayed on the road as much as possible and encountered no other human up close. On the second night, nearly at dawn, I saw a landmark I recognized because the truck had stopped there to add wood to the boiler. I knew that Poettmes was not very far away. I rested that morning in a barn of an abandoned farm and risked walking around Poettmes to Kuenhausen in daylight.

His feet were blistered and bleeding and he carried Neuburg’s mud on his body and in his clothes, he had no

documents but he was back safely with us. The tale of his harrowing experience was actually told over a period of days, because he was so exhausted and had difficulty concentrating his thoughts and forming words.

Father was back! The lack of food for our community, the uncertainty that all of us were facing, seemed to diminish with this very positive turn of events; it was almost a sign that we had reached the bottom and from now on things would be better. My mother and aunts moved with new energy. Our job in the woods came to an end for me and my brother after we felled the last marked tree. Following our customary supper, the farmer's wife handed us a small sack filled with food. There was half of a loaf of black bread, several potatoes, an onion and a small piece of smoked ham. She smiled at us as we left their house.

The month of April was warm and we went back to playing in the field and the woods in back of the farm. One day the farmer/mayor ran to the field, chasing his young farm hand. They were both excited and we followed them at a distance. Inspecting the meadow, the young man had found an oblong silver object nearly the size of a bathtub. It lay in a depression in the field and you practically had to walk into it to see it. Cautious at first to make certain it was not a bomb, between the two of them they managed to turn it over and roll it to a flat area where they proceeded to examine it. We had seen these objects in the distance and we suspected that they had found a fuel tank that the American fighter planes sometimes carried on their wing tips. This one had fallen off or dropped on purpose and had landed intact. There were dents and scuffs on it but it appeared whole. The farmer found an opening, unscrewed it, stuck his nose near it and

sniffed. He unwound his belt, straightened it and stuck it into the tank and pulling it out he shook it. There was fuel in the tank.

The farmer and his helper were back with a horse-drawn cart and they managed to load the tank on board and drive it to the barn. There they unloaded it next to a stack of straw against the far wall. We watched them and if they saw us they ignored our presence, which later proved to be their big mistake. The stack of straw hid some boards and behind those board there was an automobile. It was a four door Opel that was dusty but looked in good shape. The tires were off and stacked in a corner; the car sat on wooden blocks. We figured that at some time in the past gasoline became unavailable for civilian use and once his tank ran dry he put the car away to wait for better days. Now he had gasoline that he covered with the straw along with the car, but the better days had not yet arrived. That evening we spread the word to our parents about the car.

Evenings for the adults were spent in conversation, usually sitting at the communal table in the middle of the room. Tea was consumed and the talk was mostly in Russian, but also in German, spoken and understood by the Estonian father. The Latvian mothers were particularly adept at gossip. There was an older man, a Latvian who spoke little and spent most of his time playing solitaire with a deck of cards that had been so worn, only he could determine their suit and value. It turned out that he had something in common with our Aunt Antanina: They both had attended middle school at the same time in St. Petersburg, Russia, before the first war. They had been in different schools, but both of them had similar memories. His name was Simson, an unusual name for a Latvian. In time we learned more about him.

The two older Latvian girls, more like young women, Lily and Baiba, were very attractive, especially Lily. She was also pleasant and easygoing, whereas Baiba, her younger

sister, seemed angry most of the time and would argue with anyone at a drop of a hat. She had a scar on the top of her foot and on her calf, which seemed to bother her because she continuously looked and stroked it with the top of her fingers although her walk did not seem to be impaired. She claimed she had been injured in a bombing raid the previous fall and perhaps that incident had altered her demeanor. She too was pretty whenever she smiled. Both of them watched over Simson, because at times he seemed not to be able to function and appeared to inhabit a different world from us. We assumed he had seen some of the worst work by evil men.

Evidence that war was near its end was the unopposed flights of allied aircraft in the hunt of any target. American fighter planes roamed the countryside shooting at nearly anything that moved or was painted green. One day Arutis and I were coming back from Poettmess and, as we were nearing Kuenhausen, we heard the screaming of an aircraft engine close by. Just as we turned, behind us and only a several dozen meters off the ground, a fighter plane was aimed straight at us and our village. We dove into the ditch just as the pilot opened up with his wing-mounted machine guns churning up the road and taking chunks out of the first barn in the village. Arutis and I stayed in the ditch and watched as the airplane with a red tail made a circle in the sky and came our way again. This time he did not fire, probably thinking that there was nothing worth wasting his ammunition for and, slowly gaining altitude, he was out of our sight.

Chapter 16

War Ends

By mid-April, the war front was approaching our village. We could hear sporadic artillery fire in the distance and one morning there was a boom from the west with a whistle of a shell over our heads seconds later, followed by another boom in the east. This artillery shot had come soon after we had seen a small observation plane just to the north of us. Our guess was that the shell had fallen in Poettmes. A minute or two later, the sounds repeated and our father insisted that the whole family go to the cellar because artillery shells could fall short. We did, but didn't stay there long. The shelling ceased and we assumed that they had found their target. Later we learned that was not the case. In Poettmes, there was an anti-aircraft battery of 88's that the Americans spotted from the air and tried to provoke into a duel with their 105's, but the Germans did not respond and probably had moved somewhere else when they saw the observation airplane.

On that same afternoon, a company of German infantry rolled into Kuenhausen from the west. These soldiers looked like they meant business, dressed in camouflage ponchos, their steel helmets covered in dull paint. Most of them were carrying automatic weapons. They moved

quickly and they all seemed younger than the soldiers we had seen in the cities and the countryside in the past. About 70 meters east of the sharp turn in the road in the middle of the village, they set up a machine gun on a tripod facing west and stacked several containers of belted ammunition next to it. In the distance to the west, we heard the rumble of tank motors. The soldiers chased us in to the cellar and they covered its only ground level window with a steel plate. Only a small crack on the side was open to daylight. One of the soldiers gave my brother a loaf of army ration bread to take into the cellar.

The cellar's occupants were a mixture of local farmers and refugees and everyone looked worried. My brother and I were excited and crowded to the window trying to see the coming battle past the side of the plate. Father unceremoniously pulled us away by the scruffs of our necks and we had to settle for witnessing the battle of Kuenhausen through our ears. We could hear the chattering of the machine gun and saw an occasional tracer round's bright ricochet from a stone foundation. There were booming sounds that were louder than gunshots but not as loud as cannon shots. Later we learned these had been anti-tank weapons called *Panzerfaust* in German. The sounds ended as they had begun; it had been like a summer storm, fierce, short and calm again. Slowly we risked leaving the cellar.

It was dusk when we finally walked out in to the street. One house about 50 meters away to the east of us was burning and a local bucket brigade was putting out the fire. The streets were littered with empty machine gun and rifle shells and several American army tanks had pulled off the road and seemed to be settling in for the night. Soldiers uncoupled anti-tank cannon on wheels from the end of a truck and maneuvered it past the animal pens into the meadow, the long barrel pointing to the woods. We assumed

that was to defend against a possible German counterattack from the woods.

We were as curious as cats about the American soldiers about to camp out here for the night. Dark green and khaki-colored uniforms and steel helmets, feet in laced boots and leggings blousing their trousers, they looked confident as they mostly sat on their helmets and heated their rations on small fires next to their tanks. Their weapons, large rifles and smaller carbines, were never far from their reach. We saw several sub-machine guns slung on soldiers with stripes on their sleeves. Officers – and it was difficult to spot their insignia, unlike in the German army – had holstered pistols hanging from their belts.

Most incomprehensible was their jaws constantly moving as if they were eating something. It did not take long for us to spot the flat, stick-like objects they were putting in their mouths after they had spat out what had been there before. The wrapper they tossed and we picked up said “Spearmint” and it smelled very good. It was to be one more day before we would have the nerve to ask the soldiers for a piece of whatever it was.

The local population’s attitude toward us changed almost immediately. At first they expected that they would be treated roughly by the Americans and we, the refugees, would be coddled by them; that we in turn would take the opportunity to kick them when they were down. All of a sudden there was more milk for us that evening and for the first time they appeared to take an interest in our welfare.

The American front line troops were totally indifferent to the local farmers and only mildly interested in us. We looked and acted differently from the German kids, who were mostly kept indoors, and when an American officer looking at us and started to ask questions, Simson spoke up in English. Hearing his words the officer nearly jumped to

attention. This seedy, ragged and unshaven individual spoke King's English as if he had just taken a short leave from Oxford. Through the American officer, we learned that changes would be forthcoming in the near future but for now martial law was in effect and the combat troops would stay out of any civilian disputes or governance.

The local farmers read the situation and within a day they were back to their old form. What they did not know was the fact that the front line troops they had just encountered had nothing to do with civilian or refugee matters and that task fell to a different department of the army. The civilian administration corps with their new order would follow shortly.

For us the war was over. It would be nearly a month before the official German surrender but we no longer ducked when an airplane flew over and Father was visibly relieved that he would not be visited by the Gestapo for a document check and deserting the work gang. There were no immediate changes in our lives until two days after the battle of Kuenhausen. Our father and several other men from our group found and broke into an abandoned German army supply truck. They helped themselves to all that was there including margarine, canned meats, bread, some cigarettes and about a 15-kilogram bag of wrapped hard candy that Father carried on his back with the other items. This bounty was shared with everyone in our refugee group. That night we ate better, much better, but our parents rationed out the candy to three pieces per day.

The first group of American combat soldiers had moved on but there were convoys driving through our village, seemingly without pause. Most of the vehicles consisted of their so-called "deuce and a half" trucks towing trailers and loaded either with supplies or troops.

Occasionally we would see a smaller truck or jeep

with officers of various ranks sitting with their legs stretched out and their feet on the jeep's fenders. Occasionally they would stop and we would swarm them asking for candy or chocolate and sometimes we would be rewarded with a stick of chewing gum or one of their K ration cartons after they had removed the four pack of cigarettes from it. Those were prized items for us because they contained powdered lemonade that we would dissolve and drink as well as crackers and chocolate.

By the end of April, we began to see traffic going the other way. These were men in civilian clothing, walking in small groups or singly. There was nothing in our village that would be worth stopping for and so we knew very little about them. We speculated that they were war prisoners or forced laborers liberated, released and headed for home and had to be French or Belgian in order to be able to walk home. One small group did stop to rest and I personally did not witness the beginning of this incident but I saw the results. One of our group, and I always suspected Baiba, using sign language, told them about a car sitting in a barn. These three men decided that they had walked far enough, broke into the barn, uncovered the car and the fuel, mounted the tires and, with the mayor screaming at them, managed to start it and drive off. War reparation payment had come early for the mayor.

With our food situation stabilized, the main topic of conversation among the adults was our immediate and perhaps long-term fate. The possibilities seemed endless and, on some days optimism prevailed, and the best-case scenario was the Russians withdrawing to their pre-war borders and us going home. The worst-case scenario was the Russians occupying most of Eastern Europe and we being forcibly returned. (We did not know it at the time but this scenario was being considered at a very high level by some western nations including the United States.) In between, we

considered emigration and who would be willing to accept us. The United States, almost everyone's first choice, had recently established a strict immigration policy. This we learned from Simson, who had perked up a bit and would join the adults in these discussions.

Lily had an admirer. Actually she had many; American soldiers turned their heads and whistled whenever they saw her, but this one, a Captain, was very persistent and would visit her in the evenings. He drove his own jeep, sometimes accompanied by another officer, who would spend time with Baiba. During the first several visits, Simpson was used as an interpreter but later they seemingly developed their own language of facial expressions and hand and arm motions mixed with a smattering of German and much, much laughter. The Captain never failed to bring presents to Lily and her mother, who flirted with him to the other women's amusement. The other women, including my aunts and mother, thought that the Captain's intentions were serious. One evening he surprised a very grateful Simson with a new deck of playing cards.

Simson had come from a prominent family in Latvia. His family, like many others there, had German ancestry. After finishing middle school in St. Petersburg, he had enrolled into a university in England. After reading law, as he put it, he had returned to Latvia and entered government service in their foreign ministry. There he rose fairly rapidly in the ranks and his last posting had been as first secretary to the Latvian embassy in London. He had been recalled just prior the first Russian occupation and had undergone severe interrogation by the communists before being freed by the Germans in 1941. Simson was extremely knowledgeable in western nations' immigration policies as well as their other foreign affairs. In his opinion, Canada and Australia, the least populated nations, were the most likely countries to accept us.

The month of May blossomed in Bavaria, the war ended officially, but our family had a setback. Arutis fell ill, probably with bronchitis and perhaps bordering on pneumonia; this is what Mother had feared, and we took him to a hospital in Poettmes. He received the best of care that this hospital could provide, with our mother hovering over the nurses and doctors. Most of the other patients in that hospital were wounded and recuperating soldiers and my brother was the only adolescent there, thus receiving more than his share of nursing. He recovered quickly, once again someone had been watching over us, and he came back to Kuenhausen with a genuine German army officer's leather map case as a souvenir. His ward mate, a captain of artillery, gave it to him figuring he would not have much need for it.

Our days at Kuenhausen were coming to an end. The military/civil administration was consolidating the refugee residences for administrative and logistical reasons, establishing centers in the larger cities in Germany. Any German barracks that had been spared aerial bombing would serve to house the refugees. The nearest center for us was Augsburg but we were destined for Ingolstadt. Health organization followed on the heels of the civil administration. One day a covered truck with a red cross on it pulled into Kuenhausen and a lady in what looked like a nurse's uniform invited everyone, kids first, to be de-loused. They dumped white powder on us, including under our collars and inside our trousers. It smelled funny but from that day on we were finally rid of those mean pests. The powder was called DDT, another miracle from America.

Samogitia Mea Patria

Part 2 Exile

Chapter 17

Ingolstadt/Donau

Our arrival at Ingolstadt refugee center in a U.S. Army truck driven by a civilian UNRRA (United Nations Relief and Rehabilitation Agency) worker was not what we expected. We were told that housing would be assigned separately to each nationality and that there already were hundreds of Lithuanians in the camp. First, there was no housing. Second, once again we were surrounded by Latvians.

Instead of army barracks, our family was told to move into an army squad tent that was set up in a small park near some Franco-Prussian war-era brick and concrete two-story buildings that were already occupied by Latvian families. Our tent home was to be temporary because our own barracks, *Albrecht Kaserne*, a few miles away, was not yet ready for occupancy.

On the positive side, the squad tent designed for ten was spacious for six people and it was private, no need to share with anyone. Toilets were in the buildings across the street on the first floor. Cooking, however, was as primitive as it gets: Two stacks of bricks four high; set apart to hold a cast iron pot between them and a wood fire below, a few meters behind our tent. Fortunately or not, depending on

your point of view, we did not have much to cook. Our rations mostly consisted of fresh bread, canned margarine, canned and fresh milk and the delicious mystery meat in rectangular tin cans labeled SPAM. We did boil water for tea and occasionally made soup whenever we were able to buy fresh vegetables. Drinking water was available at a hand pump in the park a few steps away.

Tent living in the summer is a challenge, as we soon found out. We moved in at the end of June. During the summer months on sunny days, the inside of the tent becomes unbearably hot. Rolling the side flaps up and tying them off helped if there was a breeze. Raising the flaps, however, did away with privacy and left your possessions visible to anyone with larceny on their agenda. UNRRA provided folding army cots and blankets for each person and I no longer would have to share my bed with Arutis. I am sure he also was pleased about the prospect of his own cot. Tent flaps would come down at night, leaving only the entrance and the roof flaps partially open for fresh air.

Ours was not the only tent in the park and there was considerable foot traffic for toilet, water and just human interaction. There were other Lithuanians in our tent city and we soon formed a small gang of three for exploring our surroundings. Karolis, whom we instantly renamed Charlie, was my brother's age and had an older sister. His family came from Raseiniai and his and our mother and aunts soon became friends. His father was an older person, aloof and not very sociable. One of our first discoveries was a swimming pool filled with water in a fenced area inside the courtyard of the Latvian camp. There was no gate and the pool was surrounded by various deck chairs. We immediately concluded that this had been a German army officers' establishment and it would now be ours.

Several older Latvian kids were splashing in it when

the three of us arrived with our towels, wearing short pants for swimsuits. We found out immediately that this pool was built for adults and was so deep that I could not reach the bottom. It was about ten meters square and its sides sloped at a fairly steep angle to the bottom. There were no ledges and you either hung on the edge or if you let go you had to swim. The water was not heated other than by the sun, chilly but endurable. We spent most of the afternoon jumping in and crawling out, happy that we had learned to swim. We were outnumbered by the Latvians but there was no conflict between us. It did not hurt that I could converse with them in their language, of which I learned a bit in Kuenhausen.

Several days later, there was an incident at that swimming pool that demonstrated how quickly play can turn into tragedy when there is no adult supervision. There were perhaps seven or eight kids our age, some in the water, others drying off and sunning themselves when a boy, 13 or 14 years old, with a good running start, jumped in, splashing down several meters from the edge. I could see panic in his eyes when his head came out of the water and his feet could not touch the bottom. He started to flail his arms in the air, his face went under again and when he came up his shout for help came from a mouth half-filled with water: "*Paliga!*" ("Help," in Latvian). Down he went again; his effort to reach the edge seemed to be doing just the opposite; flogging the water with his arms drove him backward, toward the middle. I looked around, everybody was just staring at the boy; those who had been swimming were scrambling out.

"He is not going to make it on his own," I said to myself. I jumped in and made my way around him, because I knew that if he saw me he would grab or hit me with his arms. I swam up to his back and pushed him with my hands toward the edge. We made progress and the bigger kids finally reached to pull him out. He lay on his back gasping,

but he was all right. The word of the near drowning must have spread, because signs were posted the following day in German and Latvian warning of deep water and not to go in if you could not swim. The pool's days, however, were numbered for another reason: The water started to turn green and did not look healthy. If there had been filtration or pumps, no one knew about their use or maintenance. Other signs went up telling us to stay out. We would need to find someplace else to swim. For days afterward, I kept wondering why everyone else was just standing and looking at the drowning boy and I had to be the one to jump in. To me it seemed like the most natural thing to do. Also, I refused to believe that no one else would have jumped in. I was simply first.

The Danube River divided Ingolstadt in two. We were in the north part of the city, not far from the *Nordbahnhof*, the north railway station. The city center also was on the north side closer to the river. Much of the riverbank was overgrown with willows and bushes and a footpath went east, toward a partially destroyed railway bridge. When we arrived in Ingolstadt, that bridge was the only way to cross the Danube and keep your feet dry. We explored the riverbank and saw the damaged foundation for the road bridge, which had toppled into the river. Close by, engineers were stringing a cable across for a ferry to transport people and freight between the two halves of the city. We walked some ways beyond the partially bombed-out railroad crossing and there was the Autobahn. It was Germany's pride, a divided highway running north to Nuremberg, south to Munich. There was a temporary bridge crossing the Danube with MPs posted at each end. Most of the traffic we saw was U.S. military.

About a week and a half of our arrival in Ingolstadt, my brother, Charlie and I decided to look at our future

residence, *Albrecht Kaserne*, the permanent barracks for probably half a century that housed an entire regiment at one time or another. It was one of several and the others were spaced about half kilometer from each other. Ukrainians were to occupy the one immediately to our left. To the right was a wooden, single-story barrack building with a playground in back of it. Beyond that was an embankment with a fence on top that screened a sidewalk and a wide street leading north to the train station. Just past the *Albrecht Kaserne* along that street on the left side, there were multi-story brick buildings that may have once been officer's quarters. Those also were being converted to house Lithuanian refugees. Some had already moved in and we met two older boys who would at times hang out with us.

The *Kaserne* itself was a two-story brick building with an attic that you could stand in. The roof was red-tiled and the building, while continuous, had wings that ran on an angle, partially enclosing the yard behind the building. The wings ended with round towers, their flat summits even with the attic floor. Circular stairways inside the towers led to the tops, which were surrounded by a brick ledge about chest high. Firing slits, also chest high, were spaced about two meters apart inside the stairway. There was an archway opening in the center of the building leading to a yard that had probably served as a training and parade ground. It was large and ended at the far end with an embankment that actually covered bunkers. The way we discovered them was because a stick of bombs had stitched the embankment, missing the *Kaserne* but penetrating the tree- and brush-covered embankment and a meter-thick brick bunker roof. This would need to be explored.

Immediately to the south, on a tree-lined street coming from the city center and ending at the front of the *Kaserne*, there were several apartment buildings that had

somehow escaped bomb damage. These too would house Lithuanians, making three separate camps; the largest by far was *Albrecht Kaserne*. The plan was to have everything ready and the people moved in by September 1, in time for the start of the school year. As impossible as that seemed, it would actually begin as planned.

The Lithuanian exile community in Ingolstadt had organized itself in the style of self-rule. An elected chairman and his committee handled the affairs with UNRRA and with the local German government, a supply manager was responsible for the distribution of rations and a separate committee or board had its own chair for education.

Elections for these offices had taken place before we arrived in Ingolstadt. The living quarter assignments were made by the committee in advance of the actual move. In our case, the squad room assigned to us as our future home needed a thorough cleaning and a coat of paint on the walls and the arched ceiling. In addition, we had to install a wood-burning cooking stove with an oven. This entailed leading the smoke stack pipes through the top of the large window. We were most fortunate because our room was one of four in the entire building that had a small, windowless adjoining storeroom. This happened to be the result of a twist in construction due to the way the wings of the building angled to accommodate the building's continuity. Ours was to be the first room on the second floor of the right wing. Enclosed toilets were on one side, wash basins with an open urinal along the other wall were to our right in a large tiled room with frosted window. That had been by design when men only occupied the building; for now the urinal was roped off with a sign that said "DO NOT USE."

While the finishing touches on our room were being made, more construction was going on in the hallways. The original building's architectural design had all the squad

rooms facing outward. Across a fairly wide hallway from each squad room were sizable niches facing the yard, each with its own arched window. Enclosing these niches created a room large enough to house two people comfortably. The new walls for these niches were mostly masonry and doors were scrounged from bombed out buildings. All floors in the rooms and hallways were hardwood parquet; the outside walls were thick enough to stop a small cannon shell. A large communal shower room was on the first floor near the left tower and the tower itself housed the boilers and the coal for heating the water.

We could not wait to move in, meet the other kids and start school. For now, however, there was a lot of exploring to be done, which included the U.S. Army garrison in Ingolstadt. Several units from the 9th Infantry Division were billeted nearby and we would hang out at meal times near their field kitchens where the food was prepared. We were not permitted to be in the immediate vicinity of the actual cooking. These soldiers in white did not want outsiders near them when they were working. They would set up folding tables, load them with silvery metal food pans, fill them from their pots and kettles and stand in back of the tables with ladles in their hands. The soldiers would line up with their mess kits that included a divided metal plate, bowl, a metal mug and silverware, hung from a handle of the main bowl.

We would wait for the soldiers to finish eating and we would then offer to wash their mess kits. Some soldiers would ignore us, others lighting up their cigarettes seemed glad to have help for this chore and would hand their mess kits to us. There usually was a short line at the washing station. First we would scrape the leftovers into a corrugated

metal can. Then we would dunk the dishes and silverware into a drum with boiling water that had a gasoline-fired flame underneath. There was a long-handled scrub brush for stubborn stains. Dunk and look to see that the dishes were clear. The second, similar drum was for rinsing and then we were done, except for the inspection by the owner of the mess kit. If he was satisfied there would be a reward of chewing gum or chocolate; if he found a flaw with our work, back we went to the boiling drums.

The soldiers in Ingolstadt, and I imagine in all of Germany, had a lot of time on their hands now that the war was over. We would spot them walking in small groups in the city or see larger concentrations near their recreation hall called Go Devil Hall, named after their regiment. We would watch them tossing a hard looking ball to each other wearing a large mitt on one hand. The soldiers were used to us and treated us like a small nuisance, which could be gotten rid of with candy or gum. Some soldiers, however, had little or no tolerance and would chase us away with language that needed no translation.

That summer, I encountered something in human relations that many years later I recalled and inquired among others who had been in other camps if what I had experienced was unique and just a fluke, or was it a common experience. As I had just said, approaching soldiers was a game of chance. Either you gained a prize or were treated as a pest and chased away. That was not true with the black soldiers we called Negroes. Most of the time they would share whatever they had and if they had nothing, you could see genuine regret on their faces when they shook their heads and opened their empty hands. It was always like that and if there was a choice, we would always approach the black soldiers first. Other kids later told similar stories confirming the compassion that I encountered and concluded that a

black soldier just could not say no to a kid. I took their generosity for granted and never questioned why that was.

Exploring the banks of Danube one day, we managed to cross to the other side on the ferry, which was a large raft attached to a steel cable that was anchored on each bank of Danube. The current of the river was used to move this raft from one bank to the other on some kind of schedule.

Picking our way through reeds and bushes that nearly obscured a footpath, we spotted a beached boat. We had not seen boats on the Danube before and wondered who had brought it here and for what purpose. The boat was mostly metal, seven or eight meters long and completely covered except for a small open area in the back. Charlie said: "Let's look to see what's inside."

"Not sure it's a good idea," I said. "Somebody could be living in there."

My brother took a stick and banged on the side of the boat. It sounded real loud and hollow, like an empty barrel. "If anyone is inside they'll come out," Arutis said. "If no one shows, I will go in first."

After a minute he went over the side into the open section of the slightly tilted boat. A doorway led into the enclosure and my brother disappeared inside. "You are not going to believe what I found," he shouted. "The ship is full of ammunition!"

Charlie and I scrambled on board. Sure enough there were boxes and open crates of rifle ammunition, metal cans containing larger shells, probably for heavy machine guns and 20mm cannon, and more containers with small-caliber carbine shells. As we looked around and surveyed its contents, the mystery only deepened. We expected the ammunition to be something that the German army had abandoned, and most of it was German, but the small-caliber rounds around the rim said: ".30 cal.," which was a U.S.

designation and we recognized their carbine 15-round magazines. Very strange!

“What are we going to do with this stuff?” Charlie asked

“We aren’t taking it back to our tent,” said Arutis and added: “We cannot tell our parents about this. If they find out we will be restricted to the camp.”

There was no disagreement. We searched the entire boat and only found more of the same; a lot of different kinds of ammunition for light weapons. We knew that at some time or another we would need to tell the authorities about this, but there was no rush. First we needed to find out what was inside these shells.

We stayed away from the larger caliber shells, but the rifle and carbine ammunition was not difficult to dismantle. It was only a matter of wedging the bullet in an opening like a small pipe and wiggling it until it loosened up and you could pull it out. We poured the gunpowder into a pile, left a small trail of powder to it, then lit the improvised fuse and watched the pile of powder from a distance whoosh into a bright flame and smoke. The carbine ammunition was more fun because, after removing the bullet, you could leave the powder inside, light it and as the powder rapidly burned to the bottom it would fire the primer like a bullet. We had discovered a sort of reverse process of shooting the primer into paper targets.

Our activity was far enough from the populated areas and the river’s fast current rushing past the shore made enough noise to mask these miniature gun shots. We did not think anyone saw us and we were safe from adult attention so it was probably inevitable that something would go wrong. It happened when Charlie lit a pile of gunpowder without a warning and the fire reached a carbine shell I was getting ready for target shooting. As I was scrambling away the shell

fired and the primer found my ankle as an unintended target. The small metal cup penetrated my skin just above my ankle bone, on the inside of my left leg. It did not hurt much, but there was quite a bit of blood and my biggest worry was what I was going to tell our parents. We stopped our games, used a handkerchief to bind up the ankle and I sat for a while wondering if this was just a scratch or if the primer was inside the skin. It was too sore to touch and probe, so I limped back to our camp.

We kept our find secret and I tried not to limp in the presence of parents and aunts. The bleeding had stopped and I washed off the dried blood and, other than some swelling, my wound was hardly noticeable. There was no pain whenever I was off my feet and only mild discomfort while I was sitting or lying in bed. The following day was rainy and I hung around the camp alone. Charlie and Arutis went off somewhere, telling me that we would visit the boat together on the following day.

That morning, the swelling on my ankle had gone down and the small wound did not look infected. We made our way across the river and when we walked up to where we had left it, the boat was gone. Had someone taken it, or had it floated loose and the current had taken it we could only speculate. We found some empty shells we had dismantled and burn marks on the ground and that was it.

Another week went by and we were assured that this would be our last in the tent and that the *Kaserne* was nearly ready for occupancy. Enough time to uncover another cache of ammunition. On our walk along a path we used as a shortcut from tent city to the new camp, we had spotted a number of beehives in a small meadow or a field that was fenced off from our path. These beehives were well-made and well-maintained wooden boxes, painted white, six in a row and clearly belonged to someone living close by. What

was odd was that they looked abandoned; no insects buzzing around that you would normally see during the day in late August.

As usual my brother took the initiative: “Let’s see if we can get some honey,” he said as he poked a stick under the chain link fence.

We had to walk further and do some digging before there was an opening large enough for us to crawl under. Walking carefully up to the first hive, we lifted the hinged roof.

“Empty,” said Charlie. “It looks fake or unfinished and we can forget about honey,” he lamented.

The next one we opened was not empty. It was nearly full of cardboard boxes, each filled with rifle ammunition. But this was not ordinary ammunition; the bullets – the projectiles themselves – were made out of wood pressed in to an ordinary powder-filled and primed shell. Instead of pointed ends, these bullets were rounded at the tip and as we took one apart, we found that the bullet was hollow. Practice rounds to be used in maneuvers that had the feel of the real thing to the soldier firing it but it would not do serious harm if it hit someone. We found out later that the design called for soft wood, which would actually shatter in contact with the atmosphere when fired and would fall to the ground as slivers.

Further searching revealed only empty beehives. We went back under the fence, each of us carrying pockets full of practice ammo with no idea as to what we would do with these shells. We just could not leave empty-handed and I knew that we would find a place to hide them.

We moved out of our tent near the end of August. The war

had come to an end everywhere when Japan surrendered. The news of the atomic bombs was conveyed to us by a two-sheet Lithuanian weekly newspaper published in Augsburg. This newspaper would grow and for the next several years would be our main source for news in the Lithuanian exile communities in western Germany. This newspaper also confirmed rumors of genuine evil that was about to descend on all Eastern European refugees. It was an incident that shook our belief in the virtue of western civilization itself.

Not all evil comes in the middle of the night with the devil creeping in from shadows, causing everlasting harm and then retreating back to the shadows. This evil arose from sources that were seen by some as good, or benign at worst by others. The face of this evil was Eleanor Roosevelt, widow of the recently deceased president of the United States. It came about once the war was finished when a monumental question was raised: "What to do with the hundreds of thousands of refugees from the Soviet captive nations now scattered over Western Europe, most of them in the allied sections of Germany?" The newly organized United Nations assumed that problem and searched for a solution. Our family and tens of thousands of Lithuanians fell into that category.

Eleanor Roosevelt, who was now the U.S. ambassador to the UN, had an answer, it was simple and direct: "Why don't they go home!" That statement was music to Joseph Stalin's ears. Eleanor admired him and called him Uncle Joe. Stalin not only requested but demanded that all Soviet citizens be repatriated back to the Soviet Union. He claimed Soviet citizenship not only for the hundreds of thousands of Russians who had fled his regime or had joined Vlasov's army on the side of Germany, but also for Ukrainians and everyone from the three Baltic countries.

Mrs. Roosevelt unfortunately was not the only one to

urge us to return to the “worker’s paradise.” There were left-leaning congressmen, members of the State Department and other influential ignoramuses who agreed with Stalin that those refugees who did not want to go home voluntarily probably were Nazis and needed to be repatriated by force to face justice. Many elected and appointed useful idiots simply followed the lead of Mrs. Roosevelt and saw repatriation as the solution to the refugee problem in Europe. Our determined opposition to be repatriated must have been evident to those in charge because they brought soldiers with loaded guns to load us into trucks for a trip east.

One morning, U.S. soldiers, most of them MPs, surrounded our new camp. We were quarantined inside, ordered to stay indoors. The average soldier guarding our camp had no knowledge of what was going on, and the official announcement said that there would be a search for Nazis. We knew the real reason and that was an imminent forced deportation. The fear in the camp was greater than we had experienced during the worst air raid. Later we learned that most or all of the refugee camps in Germany had also been surrounded and for all practical purposes the people were arrested, the same as us. What we did not know was the battle going on in the U.S. legislature and the State Department on our behalf. Clear-thinking Americans presented the fact that United States had not recognized the annexation of the Baltic States by the Soviet Union and Stalin had no claim on us. While the discussions raged we were in limbo, waiting. Finally, sanity and truth prevailed and the soldiers departed. We were free inside occupied Germany.

Not so with some Ukrainians. In Dachau, a city well known for evil, there was an annex next to the former concentration camp housing Ukrainian refugees. U.S. troops pulled in with their empty trucks and started to round up the refugees – men, women and children for deportation to

Stalin's "paradise." The panic and fear by the people was something the soldiers had never expected or had ever seen before. Rather than submit, many refugees reportedly tried to commit suicide in a truly gruesome manner: By sticking their heads through a window pane and sawing at their throats with broken glass. This was too much for the officers in charge of the detail and they gave the order to stand down. Unlike most people, from then on, for the rest of my life, two images of evil instead of one were seared in my mind when the name Dachau was brought up.

Is ignorance and stupidity as demonstrated by Mrs. Eleanor Roosevelt evil? No, by itself most likely it is not. Having massive influence, thanks to her husband and his memory and her new position in the UN, forcing events that would destroy thousands of lives is an epitome of evil. Stalin was the Everest of evil in the last millennium and his enablers doing his bidding therefore were evil. Mrs. Roosevelt cannot be excused for ignorance of Stalin's murderous regime, causing millions to starve on their fertile land and millions more being exiled to Siberia to a certain death because this evil had been going on for more than a quarter of a century. The average literate person in the Western world knew that because it had been reported in the media and volumes had been written by actual witnesses to describe Stalin's terror. Why did Mrs. Roosevelt then push forward Stalin's agenda? Stupidity does not seem to fit. Evil does!

It may be a coincidence but after that close call the official name for us was no longer refugees. A large sign went up in front of *Albrecht Kaserne* designating it as a Displaced Persons camp. From then on we were called DPs. The name stuck long after we were no longer "displaced." The word "displaced" to me was itself misplaced from the reality as to who we were. We were victims of Stalin and Hitler who had conspired to divide Europe between them and would murder

anyone standing in their way. Hitler was dead; Stalin had won and did not want any witnesses to his evil methods or living opposition. We were both and to call us “displaced” was ignorant at best, willful and perhaps a wishful postponement of the forced repatriation sought by Stalin’s boot lickers in the west. “Go home and you will no longer be displaced!”

Chapter 18

Camp Life

With one or two exceptions, our community had a sufficient number of qualified teachers to staff a primary school (grades 1–4) and lower six (of eight) classes of middle school. The school building was the wooden single-story barracks sitting to the right of the main camp number one main building and about halfway to the camp's outer perimeter bordering the street leading to the north train station. Classes started in September; each grade had its own classroom staffed by a homeroom teacher. Furniture consisted of standard German school benches for the students and a table and chair for the teacher. A blackboard hung on a wall behind the teacher. Typical class size ranged from six to fourteen students. The curriculum would duplicate the established education norms in independent Lithuania prior to 1939.

There was, however, one major problem: There were no textbooks! None for the students! Some of the teachers had the foresight to pack their own subject books with their belongings when escaping the red menace, but most, like our family, carried only the bare necessities. The teachers, who on the first day of school walked in to the classroom with a textbook in their arms, received accolades reserved for

heroes.

In the primary grades where the homeroom teacher covers all subjects, not having textbooks was a near disaster. The teacher had to rely on his or her memory, sometimes consulting with colleagues, writing notes to be copied later by each pupil as homework. In arithmetic, the problems were presented on the blackboard. Lab materials of any kind were out of the question.

I entered the third grade with eight other classmates, four boys and four girls. Testing our level of knowledge was the first item on the agenda because all of us had interruptions of one kind or another in our former grades. The German school I had attended in Kamenz served me well in arithmetic and nothing else. Whatever I had missed, I was determined to catch up and do well. Had we not have had our education interrupted I would have qualified to enter fourth grade but the testing revealed deficiency in history, geography and science. This was not particularly unusual because the grade I was in had students even older than me. Everyone's schoolwork had been interrupted and suffered to some extent. Mine was not the worst because I had attended a local school in Germany for a few months. My classmates' families each had their own odysseys and had taken different routes at different times to arrive in Ingolstadt and some kids had only sporadic homeschooling for an entire year.

My brother Arutis was in a grade above mine, as was our new friend Charlie Jautakis. Their class consisted of thirteen students, the majority being boys. One of the boys, Algimantas Grigaravicius, was my age and later we became friends but I always suspected that he jumped a class above me because his father was the chair of the education committee. His younger sister Milda was in my class. I did not think much of that type of promotion and I wondered if jumping a grade served the student in the short and the long

run. What exactly was the benefit of graduating a year early? And yet as long as they could keep up with the schoolwork and not drag his or her classmates down, I had no real objection although I disliked favoritism in any form.

One of my classmates, Vilius Jakusovas, was of Russian descent. His parents and he were as Lithuanian as everyone else with the exception of their religion. They were Russian Orthodox and Vilius was exempt from our religious activities. The rest of us had been brought up as Roman Catholics and our school day began with a prayer. Vilius would stand respectfully and remain silent when we crossed ourselves before and after the prayer. In the beginning we found it odd but soon accepted this as normal. He was a good student and we became friends, hanging out together between classes. He was also exempt from attending mass on Sundays and holidays which was mandatory for a good grade in religion.

Because we lacked textbooks, our school day did not end with the last class and normal homework. We would copy lessons by hand into our notebooks either from an existing textbook or teacher's notes and pass them on to the next kid. This additional work would consume most of the evening during the week. The teachers also bore an extra load of work and did much improvising, especially in subjects that called for reading, such as history and "Know your Country" in lower grades, or civics in upper grades. Geography was particularly difficult to improvise and required negotiations with the local German schools for maps. The most difficult subject, the Lithuanian language, would have been nearly impossible to teach correctly had it not been for one of the teachers, Miss Bugaite, daughter of one of the most prominent and well-respected Lithuanian language experts. She had brought all necessary textbooks to teach grades one through 12. Clearly her father had passed on his own passion

for Lithuanian language to his daughter in order for her to carry this extra luggage through the chaos of war.

My homeroom teacher, a man of about fifty, was a primary school teacher from rural Lithuania. He lived with his son, a grown man and had been either separated or widowed, I never found out or cared. We did not like him because he was crude, sarcastic and at times a bit cruel. One day when he was passing by my desk, he saw my hand had an injured finger; the nail was black and blue. He looked at it, put the blunt end of a pencil on the nail and pressed. "Does that hurt?" he asked.

I did not answer but I wished someday to see him in severe pain. Otherwise he was competent if devoid of humor and he did not appear to like kids. Feelings were mutual. He was fair as far as the grading was concerned and did not seem to have any favorites among his students. Nor did I expect any of my classmates to seek the title of his favorite student.

Our camp community did not have very many people from my hometown of Telsiai. There was a construction contractor and his wife and two children: a boy and a girl, both a bit younger than me. There was also a war widow with a son, Kastytis or Kostas, older than me, who was in my class. His maternal grandmother lived with them and to hear her speak was like turning the clock back several hundred years. She spoke pure Samogitian, which to me was the mother language from which all the other Lithuanian dialects evolved. To me her language was not as strange as to some others because I heard much of it from older people at home in Telsiai, but the other kids would beg her to tell stories, folk tales from the old days just to hear her talk. She had a wealth of them and enjoyed entertaining the kids who would listen attentively but later would ask me or my brother for a translation.

Scouting was organized that same autumn. Boys and

girls of all ages joined enthusiastically. Not surprisingly, most of the adult scout leaders were teachers. The exile scouts would follow the established organizational scout order of independent Lithuania and abide by the international scout movement's rules. We would maintain ties with scouts in other Lithuanian exile communities in Germany. My brother and I joined but Arutis was less enthusiastic than me. He disliked authority over him in any form and to him this would be another set of rules he would have to follow and obey. I did not disagree with that assessment but I looked forward to the planned outings, camps and other activities with kids our own age. They were not long in coming.

As we began to settle in to the new environment, unsure how long it would last in the present form, we merged into a community consisting of people from dissimilar backgrounds, from different regions of Lithuania and a great variety of occupations. Tight living quarters, lack of basic material goods and the ever-present uncertainty about our future could result in frayed nerves and small conflicts except for the fact that we all had one thing in common: Hate for the regime occupying our homeland and communism in general. We also felt that we represented Lithuania to the local German population and to the refugees from other countries in adjoining camps, which united us even more. Any crime, no matter how small, would reflect on all of us.

With few exceptions, the duties and responsibilities assumed by individuals to make our community functional were not paying jobs. Managing the stores, food distribution, medical services and teaching all were voluntary. Our father, a policeman by profession, assumed a volunteer security post with several other men. They took turns patrolling the camp perimeter and grounds at night. They were not armed and in a real emergency they were instructed to call the military police and later the local police department. To the best of

my knowledge, none of that was ever necessary and the worst were calls to break up drunken brawls. One of these incidents resulted in a very painful bite of my father's finger by an inebriated names day celebrant.

Our mother was one of the exceptions and was compensated. Our local elected government had no money of its own, but UNRRA had a budget for such necessities and she was paid in *Reichsmarks*, which remained the official currency. Her language skills put her in charge of the switchboard that connected all of the camps and UNRRA offices with the local German telephone network. This position was shared by other ladies from different camps and while it was not a full-time position it did bring in some income to our family. In addition to their switchboard duties, these ladies ran the communications center and controlled the piped-in news and music to the camps to be broadcast over the PA systems. The other "paying" jobs were mostly in the service of U.S. Army officers and UNRRA officials. My classmate Kostas' mom worked as a waitress in the U.S. Army Officers Club and her pay consisted of tips. She would also bring home gum and chocolate for her son, who would sometimes share this bounty with me.

There were two Catholic priests in our community. One became our school chaplain and was the de facto Monsignor. On Sundays he held a mass for the Lithuanian Catholics in one of the most beautiful churches in the city. The first time I walked inside, I was overwhelmed by the beauty of the stained glass windows and even more with the ceiling, which was totally covered with scenes from the Bible. Too often during a sermon my thoughts and my eyes would drift to the scenes with angels and Jesus and the Holy Spirit emerging from heavens, to be nudged by my father to pay attention. This church was ours for an hour on Sunday mornings and holidays and for vespers in the evening in May

and October. A church of such beauty seemed like an oasis in the desert of a bombed-out Ingolstadt.

In our free time, we picked up where we had left off in the summer, before the school year began. We explored. There was much to see and to discover, starting with the bunkers immediately behind the *Kaserne* building. There were parallel bunkers about 70 or 80 meters behind the ones nearest to our home building and beyond that there was a park. These bunkers were fortifications that nearly surrounded and had guarded the city north of the Danube as Ingolstadt probably existed in the 1870s. The space between these bunkers was like a huge trench, and in fact there was a stream of water running in the middle.

Our entrance into the bunkers was through the hole made by a bomb. The opening was two or three meters wide and we descended down the rubble caused by the explosion. The only available light came from the several bomb holes and we had to light our own way using U.S. Army flashlights. Between us we had several, gifts from U.S. soldiers who probably felt no more need for them. These were dull olive drab color and were “L” shaped, with the bulb and reflector at right angles to the handle containing the round batteries. There was a clip attached to the back of the flashlight housing so that you could fasten it to your pocket, freeing your hands. The batteries were the limiting factor of how long we could explore, because once they died replacements were almost impossible to find. We discovered that there had been passageways from somewhere in the *Kaserne* or its vicinity to the bunkers, but they were bricked off on the south wall inside the bunker and inaccessible. Our first foray into the bunkers was of short duration; we needed better and longer

lasting light sources.

It seemed reasonable that if there were passageways between the *Kaserne* and the bunkers, there had to be an entrance to the tunnel inside our building. We went searching for it. The towers were a logical place, but we found no entrance there. First floor corridors were our next and last choice. It would not have made sense to put the entrance in one of the squad rooms, so we concentrated on any abnormality in the floor or walls in the corridors. We found it under some leftover construction materials beneath the stairs leading to the second floor. Lifting the cover, we discovered a rectangular hole, nearly a meter wide, going straight down and out of sight in the darkness. The only way down was by a rope and we suspected that this was not an entry/exit for soldiers but some kind of supply chute. None of us had a rope or even the nerve to climb or be lowered down even if we had one. We closed it up for another time and better equipment. We concluded that the entrance for the passage to the bunkers was or had been at one time somewhere in the yard.

Partly demolished factories also called us. There was one nearby that had to have been manufacturing various electrical components. There were piles of parts for electrical motors and we used the thin sheet metal cores for windings as boomerangs. When they sailed through the air they were graceful, but the sharp edges could hurt if they found you on the return flight. The items most useful to us were metal wire reels. Mounting two of them about a meter apart on a board made a decent vehicle for a downhill run. A boy several years older than me, a Prussian from Klaipeda by the name of Platakis – we called him Efke – who lived with his mother next door to us, seemed to know how everything worked and fit together in building electric motors. Whatever I found and did not know what it was, he would supply the answer. He

and I found a battery and managed to put on a makeshift headlight that worked on one of the wire reel carts. He had more space in his room and we used it as an assembly shop. We could not wait for the dark to try out our invention on the downhill portion of the road, near Camp #3 leading to *Nordbahnhof*.

The bunkers on the other side seemed inaccessible even though you could walk on the embankment covering its roof. It too was overgrown with trees and bushes and it adjoined the park where we would occasionally see local boys our age giving us the eye. From time to time we exchanged stones from slingshots or slings, the latter completely mystifying the Germans. Most of us were adept with this totally inaccurate weapon. Made out of heavy string or light rope with a pocket out of leather, we could toss a stone after a good wind-up 60 or 70 meters distant. Traveling over their heads, a flatter stone made a howling noise, frightful but nearly harmless because you could see it coming. The locals tried to imitate us and we would laugh our heads off as their missiles would sometimes go sideways or completely in the opposite direction. We never confronted each other up close and our stone exchanges never lasted very long because German police were patrolling the park.

Each family received an allotment of firewood for the winter for cooking and heating our room. Trucks would dump it in the yard behind the *Kaserne* and it was my and my brother's job to stack our share into a round pile resembling a tower. First, we laid a circle wood about two and a half meters in diameter, leaving the center empty. We then built up the round wall, tapering inward about head high, and dumped loose pieces of wood into the middle, filling it. Continuing the walls upward, we topped it off with a layer of wood chunks on an angle, making it look like an actual roof.

It was also our job to carry the firewood inside and

stack it next to the stove. My Aunt Antanina was always the first to wake up and she would build a fire to start heating water for washing and for making fake coffee made mostly from burnt barley and chicory. Real coffee was a luxury and not a part of our food rations provided by UNRRA.

Late that fall, after many rehearsals, the scouts presented a show to the parents and public in general. The show was made up of comedy skits, singing scout songs as a group as well as a duet of teenage sisters with excellent voices. This presentation called for us to be in scout uniforms and there were several scout masters who had managed to save theirs from the distant past. Khaki shirts were the norm and there were a surprising number of boys and girls wearing them, courtesy of the U.S. Army. My brother and I were not among them; we wore the black pullover shirts and bloused pants given to us by the Hitler Youth organization the winter before when we lived in Kamenz. Most kids recognized the uniform even without the insignia and we took a lot of ribbing. I did not appreciate them calling us Nazis. It was friendly enough, but I hated to stand out. Yet I was grateful for the long pants, which were warmer than shorts worn by everyone else. We all wore the neck scarves, their colors denoting our level of age and scouting achievement.

Christmas would be upon us shortly and it was going to be special because we had survived the war, our family was together and there was hope for a more normal life than in the years past. Our Christmas tree was up in front of our window, ornaments were meager as were the presents under it. School was out until after the New Year. Most of our time was spent beating each other up with snowballs in the yard. Inside, we invented all sorts of hide and seek games in the

hallways with living quarters being off limits. There would often be power outages and the games would become truly scary in the total darkness. Kids who owned flashlights were lucky, but all of us had fun, we were safe, dry and fed and when nighttime came we each had our own beds to crawl into.

Christmas Mass in that extraordinarily beautiful church with the homily in Lithuanian lifted everyone's hopes. The mass ended with the National Hymn sung by everyone, accompanied by the church organ. Traditional greetings with friends after the mass inevitably included the expressed wishes for the next Christmas to be at home in Lithuania. Leaving the church and going back to the camp was almost like a procession: We all were headed back to the same place, where the fate had delivered us and where we would stay for God knows how long.

New Year 1946 was awaited and welcomed if only because 1945 had been so brutal and everyone was pleased to tear that last page off the calendar. Pessimists among us were not expecting anything positive to happen to change our lives for the better and hoped things would not get worse; the optimists eagerly listened and shared rumors of ever-increasing dissention between the Western Allies and the Soviets. Rumblings in Berlin, U.S. resistance to Russian-supported communist attempt to take over the government in Greece and other incidents were grasped by desperate people to support their hope of freedom for the homeland. In some people's minds, any conflict that could escalate into war between the West and the Soviet Union had the potential of freeing the captive nations in Eastern Europe. Realists on both sides of the optimism line, however, realized that no one wanted a new war so soon after the one just ended and there could be no rational reason to start one.

Immediately after the classes resumed, our school

chaplain singled out me and another boy from my class to be altar boys. This was not a voluntary position and I resisted the idea with all my power because I knew that this would eliminate my freedom on Sundays during the mass to hang out with my friends in the organ loft, pumping the bellows for the organist. We had eagerly volunteered for that duty because maintaining air supply for the organ kept us out of sight from teachers and other busy bodies and yet permitted us to claim the fulfillment of our Sunday obligation. This was not the only objection I had; we were given practically a whole book of Latin lines to memorize and we would be tested on how well we were absorbing these responses to the priest after classes. My parents were all in favor of seeing me assisting the priest at masses. I was out of ideas about how to get out of it and about a month later there I was, in a white garment over my street clothes, walking two steps behind the priest in front of all those people. "Please, God, don't let me make a mistake of ringing the bell at the wrong time or forget the Latin words."

Later that winter I felt pain in my lower abdomen. When it became more frequent I complained to my mother. She asked me all kinds of questions and gently poked my stomach. A few doors from away from our room lived an old physician by the name of Dr. Leskauskas, who examined me and asked pretty much the same questions that my mother had asked. I told them that this had been going on for a while; at times it would go away but now it felt sharper and was more frequent. The doctor thought and said as much that it probably was appendicitis and the only remedy was to remove it. He was not a surgeon and there were no surgeons in our camp. The nearest refugee hospital was in a neighboring town about 25 kilometers from Ingolstadt. That hospital had several Lithuanian surgeons and he recommended that we go there. A few days later my mother

and I were on a train to Eichstaett.

Dr. Tumasonis confirmed the diagnosis. He was a professor of medicine and a highly regarded surgeon. His recommendation was that I stay at the hospital and he would schedule the surgery as soon as possible. There was no need for an emergency surgery and he assured my mother that this was a routine matter and I could go home after a few days. My mother was not to be reassured that quickly. She wanted to know how dangerous the anesthesia could be and if it could have a negative effect on my heart. She wanted his opinion on performing the surgery with only a local injection rather than putting me completely under.

“Normally,” he said, “the general anesthesia is preferred for this particular procedure, but because of the wartime shortages of all medication and the quality of what is available is questionable, local anesthesia may be a good choice; but there will be considerable pain for a short period of time.”

He left it up to us and I told mom I could handle a little pain. Boy, was I wrong!

Two days later, they prepped me and wheeled me into the operating room. Dr. Tumasonis explained the procedure to me and again reassured me that the operation would not take long. I was determined not to be a baby and his assistant proceeded to deaden the area on my lower abdomen by injecting the painkiller with a needle. That hurt, but I kept my mouth shut. Then he started to cut and I felt every millimeter of it. I could feel his probe and the cutting inside of me and my determination not to cry out started to slip. I moaned and groaned and the time stood still. His promised minutes of pain lasted what seemed to me longer than a full day in June.

By the time the doctor was stitching me up I was screaming my head off. I was in pain for the rest of the day and slept little because of the burning sensation in and on my

stomach.

I remained in the hospital for three days and then my mother took me back to our camp. I was to skip school for several more days and was told to stay away from games and anything that called for running or other exertion. On the plus side, I was excused from my duties as an altar boy because it involved a lot of kneeling and as a result of my absence a substitute had been chosen to replace me, permanently as it turned out.

Before the winter was over, we discovered a new playground. A natural ice rink was formed by frozen floodwater between the bunkers about two kilometers from our camp. These were the same bunkers that we had started to explore; they extended past the Ukrainian camp, and at the end, the frozen pond was surrounded by a park. There was an easy access to it and the locals had added benches at the edge of the ice. The overall size of the ice was quite long, more than a kilometer, while the width was constrained by the walls of the bunkers except at the park end where it formed a circle. There was an area that was lit up at night and on Saturday evenings and Sunday afternoons a band played dance music. There was plenty of room for us to play hockey at the other end with homemade sticks, a chunk of wood for a puck and rules we made up as we went along. None of us had skates. Shoe leather took a beating.

I was fascinated by the people skating to music. I had seen skating before on Mastis Lake, but never like this! It was as if Strauss composed especially for skating enjoyment. Couples arm in arm, single men and girls just floating to the waltzes, small mixed groups circling and orbiting the cleared area near the band. I was determined to obtain skates somewhere and to learn to skate even if I had to wait a year.

Toward the end of winter each morning, I noticed a local citizen passing through the archway of our *Kaserne* and heading for the bunkers. Dressed in worker's clothes, he carried a cloth sack in one hand and tools consisting of a stone mason's hammer, a long pry bar and a chisel. He was lean and I guessed his age somewhere between 40 and 55. He spoke to no one and his facial expression encouraged everyone else to mind their own business. At the bunkers he wasted no time, and, placing the sack on the ground, he would start to chisel bricks out from the bomb exposed section of the bunker. He cleaned the loose brick of any mortar, examined it from all sides and, when he was satisfied with the piece, he placed in a stack.

He worked six days a week, pretty much from dawn to dusk with a break for lunch when he would open the sack, pull out a sandwich wrapped in brown paper and a bottle filled with water. Finishing eating, he would fold and save the sandwich wrap, replace the water bottle back in the bag, sit for perhaps eight or nine minutes and go back to work. To my knowledge he never missed a day, even when it snowed or rained he wore a poncho over his head and shoulders and continued chipping away at the endless supply of bricks in the miles long bunkers. In the summer, by mid-morning he would take off his shirt and reach for one of several bottles of water, take a long drink, wipe his mouth and return to his task. Several years after the end of war when Germany started to rebuild, I suspect that this tireless worker had a monopoly on quality bricks either for sale or for his own building business.

With the coming of spring, the schoolwork intensified. There were final exams, oral and written in most subjects that we had to pass as part of the final grade. Flunking any of the subjects never entered my mind. I scored a 5 "very good" (top grade) in arithmetic, 4 "good" in

Lithuanian language which was the equivalent of “very good” as a matter of tradition because the middle school teacher Miss Bugaite, authority in this subject, had stated half joking that 3, “the passing” grade was given to good students, 4 “good” was for teachers and other language experts and 5 or “very good” was reserved for God. It was a very difficult subject with a mind-bending grammar and syntax and my grade was best in our class. There were two subjects I did not do well in: music, where the ability to sing determined the grade by that particular teacher, and art, drawing and sketching. We had no painting materials, but I thought I did rather well with pencils, yet I suspect my grade suffered because my work may have been compared to my brother’s drawings. A 3, “passing” was the best I could manage in music because I was nearly tone deaf, but that would change later when the subject of music in the middle school was conducted by an actual music teacher who was less concerned about one’s ability to sing and more about its appreciation and historical knowledge.

By the end of May, we were swimming in a lake we discovered about five or six kilometers north and east of the city. It was called Auwaldsee, but people referred to it mostly as Ringsee because there was an island near the middle and the lake formed a ring around it. On one side it had a wide, sandy beach gradually descending into the deeper water. It was spring fed and clear and even before school was out for the summer the water was warm enough to swim. A single road from the city accessed the lake through the woods.

Several hundred meters from the water’s edge was a permanent camp consisting of several dormitory-style buildings. In the summer of 1946, the buildings were empty and the beach was never crowded. There was no public transportation to the lake and you either walked or rode a bike. It was a long walk, especially after a day of swimming

and running around. The scout leaders planned to have the scout's camp there the following summer. For the present we would limit our scouting activities to the nearby park, learning how to set up tents, build a fire and learn new songs.

One rainy day, Arutis, Charlie and I, while rummaging in the bomb-damaged and abandoned factory, accidentally stumbled on to a solution to our lighting problem for exploring the bunkers. Barrels full of some kind of compound were stored in a tightly confined and dry corner in the basement. We knocked off the lid and there was a whitish, crumbling stuff with the consistency of dried porridge. We had no idea what it was or what it may have been used for. Scooping up a half a tin can of the stuff, we carried it outside for a better look. As raindrops fell in the can, they caused a fizzing reaction. Fascinated, we added more water, which resulted in a boiling mass creating heat and visible gas. One of us, and I don't recall who, thought it may be interesting to see if this gas would burn. Would it ever! It went up in a whoosh, flames shooting high in the air. It did not burn very long, but we could rekindle the flame by adding more water.

Whatever containers we could lay our hands on we filled them with the stuff and carried them back to camp. It was probably Efke, who seemed to know everything, who called this compound carbide. The name stuck and we performed various experiments with small amounts in different ways. The one that produced the most useful effect utilized brass hand pumps that we had found in another factory. These pumps were approximately the diameter of a soup can and twice as long, made of thick brass. One end was a screw-on nozzle tapering to a cone and an opening of several millimeters in diameter. The other end retained the plunger rod and a small handle that pushed the plunger inside the housing. Four or five spoonfuls of carbide, half of a cup

of water with the pump piston fully retracted, screw the cap on and wait for the gas escaping through the nozzle. Light it, and there was a decent torch with a flame that would burn for several minutes and light our way inside the bunkers. When the fuel was exhausted, we would shake out the ash residue, reload, add more water and re-light it. By now we had discovered the entrances to the far side bunkers and there was much to explore.

Who found it and exactly where is still a mystery, but initially the four of us who claimed ownership and swore to keep it secret moved it several times to a different hiding places inside the far bunker, fearing accidental discovery by someone else. Along with me, Arutis and Charlie, an older kid whom we called Gerve – his sister was in my brother's class – had come with us to explore. Our discovery was a sub-machine gun the likes of which none of us had ever seen. There had been a wooden shoulder stock on it but a good portion of it had been sawed off and it looked like a long pistol without a grip. What was unique and strange about it was two triggers in line inside the trigger housing. We later discovered that one was for a single shot, the other for full automatic. There also was a nearly a full magazine of nine millimeter shells typically used in pistols, which we took turns emptying one shot at a time at a target some 15 meters away inside the bunker, where we had no fear of anyone hearing the shots. This was a real find after so many disappointments, like the time we had found a box full of machine gun bolts and nothing else. Or the time we practically tripped over a Walther pistol that looked good until we discovered that the slide return spring and some other small parts were missing. This was real; we would find more ammo and keep it clean and well hidden. By the way, the machine gun bolts were not a total loss. Remembering the practice shells with the wooden bullets that we had found inside the fake beehive, we could

jam the shell by its flange into the end of the bolt and twisting the bolt mechanism would release the firing pin and fire the shell. It was useless except for the noise it made.

With the exception of the sub-machine gun, which we hid in the more distant bunker, our other stuff was stashed in the attic of the *Kaserne*. It was spacious and, unlike typical attics, we could walk upright in it. The entry was from the right hand tower and ran on top of the entire building, all the way up to the other tower. There was a gap between the roof and the side walls, permitting enough daylight to read a book. Some kids decided to keep domestic rabbits in cages up there, Charlie was one of them, and I helped him find rabbit food, mostly dandelion leaves. The cages were homemade from assorted boards and wire mesh. I am not sure where the first pair of rabbits came from but it was not long before there were enough rabbits for every kid in the camp. Beyond petting them and occasionally bringing them food, I did not want to participate in this rabbit farming because they were being raised for their meat and I hated the idea of killing them. I suspect most kids felt the way I did and before the school started in the fall adults took over and ended the project.

The scouting activity continued throughout the summer. In anticipation of the next summer's camp at Auwaldsee, the girl scouts decided to have practice or a rehearsal just outside of the *Kaserne*, on top of the overgrown bunker cover. They practiced setting up the tents, which had belonged to the U.S. Army and were the same ten-person squad tents we had lived in the summer before. The girls learned how to make a campfire; the objective was to light it with one match and keep it going. There were a number of volunteers to stay in the tents overnight. As is customary, they put guards outside the camp, rotating them every two hours until morning. Our scout troop's efforts to sneak in

and scare the girls in the middle of the night were not successful. The guards had stayed awake.

In the fall of 1946, I entered the fourth and last grade of the grammar school. The same teacher who did not like my singing and begrudged me a barely passing grade in music continued to poke fun of us who spoke the regional Samogitian dialect, which to me and to my friends was barely perceptible. I should have introduced him to Kastyts' grandmother, who would have brought him to tears in trying to comprehend her words. The rest of the schoolwork was relatively easy for me. Some kind of contagious disease had hit our camp late that year and continued into the next. The symptoms were eyes full of puss that would harden and completely shut our eyes. It would take several minutes in the morning to clear them with warm water. Whatever it was it also affected the nasal passages and caused breathing problems. UNRRA sent doctors to examine us and before departing they wrote and distributed instructions how to keep this disease from spreading, which to us was analogous to closing the barn door...Most of my classmates and pretty much the entire student body missed a number of school days and had to make them up during the Easter holidays and spring.

That autumn, several buildings housing the U.S. Army regimental recreation center were turned over to the camp's use. The smaller, barracks-like, single-story building became our day room. It had a number of tables and chairs for card playing, two ping pong tables and a single so-called billiard table, which was square, its surface of highly polished wood with markings for the initial set-up. It had pockets in each corner and used flat round discs instead of balls. Several conventional cue sticks completed the set. The departing U.S. troops had left ping pong paddles and balls, which did not sit idle for very long. Some older kids and adults had played ping

pong before and we watched and learned and whenever they stopped we immediately took their places. Unfortunately the inventory of ping pong balls soon became depleted and there was no available source for replacements. Ping pong ball repair became a necessity and a challenge if we were to continue playing. As soon as we detected a crack in the ball, we immediately took it out of service. Small to medium cracks were patched using custom-sized strips cut and trimmed from balls that were beyond repair. The area around the crack was sanded with fine sandpaper and acetone was applied around the crack. The patch was laid over the crack and the acetone was left to dry. Sanding the edges of the patch also removed the excess acetone. The repaired balls became our personal property and if the experienced players claimed the tables first, they had to negotiate with us for the ping pong balls. It was not uncommon to see balls with two or three patches; beyond that they started to bounce funny and had to be scrapped.

The larger building was an auditorium. On Saturday nights, movies, which were probably left behind when U.S. troops moved out, were shown free of charge. These were events we eagerly anticipated and we would stake out our places in the front seats long in advance. The movies were Hollywood productions with sound, English language only, which we did not understand. That did not stop us from enjoying Laurel and Hardy, everybody's favorite. In one scene in the Alps where Hardy is being saved by a St. Bernard dog after an avalanche, Arutis broke the silence and yelled out: "I want a dog like that!"

The entire audience laughed. We kidded him endlessly about that incident for months afterward.

We would suffer through drama movies, making up our own dialog, especially in love scenes, which we found insufferable. "Kiss her already and let's have some action,"

we would hear from the back.

“We want to see you chase and catch that thief and beat him up...”

Cowboy movies were also our favorites and there was no need for dialog interpretation. For us there could not be too much shooting and fighting. We soon caught on that the good guys would always win in the end and when the final scene faded and the words THE END appeared we would stand up and cheer.

Our school administration had strict rules about what movies the students were allowed to see. In general, movies with more explicit type of love scenes were put on the “not allowed” list. What the school committee deemed as violence unsuitable for adolescents also was censored for students. The word in school would be passed that this week’s film was off limits for students and one of the teachers was assigned to keep us out of the auditorium. This censorship also applied to the movie theater in the city. If a student was caught watching a prohibited film his grade for attitude was reduced for that semester and his or her parents were notified, inevitably leading to additional punishment at home.

The censored movies automatically increased our interest and curiosity. We would attempt to peek through the crack in the auditorium’s side door, and we would either be chased away by some nosy adult or simply give up out of boredom. The movies “unsuitable for children” were highly overrated.

With a great deal of promotion with posters all over the city, a movie in German called *I Want This Woman* finally appeared at the movie theater in the city. Lines to get in to see it stretched around the block and those who had seen it had nothing but praise for the story, continuous action and realism of that particular time. It was several weeks before I could get in and see it for myself and I was not disappointed.

That was the best movie ever and I went to see it a second time before it closed. Later I learned that the name of the movie in English was *Union Pacific*, a Cecil B. De Mille classic with Joel McCrea about building the transcontinental railway in the U.S. after the civil war. The title just did not translate well into German.

Sometime in our 1946 school year, our teachers and administrators organized an excursion to the Alps. With our parents' permission and chaperoned by our teachers, we packed extra clothing and food that would supplement our meals on the road and set out for Garmisch-Partenkirchen in the Bavarian Alps. The first leg of our tour took us to Munich, where we changed trains and we piled into the third-class wooden seats on a train to our destination, a resort town at the foot of Zugspitze Mountain, at nearly 3,000 meters the tallest in Germany. Before and during the war, the town hosted tourists, military and civilian vacationers, people looking for rest and fresh mountain air. At war's end, the U.S. Army took over most of the hotels and rest homes for their own use but as their presence in Germany grew smaller there was enough space left to accommodate refugee children, such as us.

This was going to be my second look at the Alps; the first one two years earlier had not gone well; I had seen them from a distance only, my last glimpse from the back of a canvas-covered truck. This time as we approached the foothills and the mountain peaks became visible in the distance I was excited, knowing that we would go to the tops and see what the world looked like below. We were housed in a hostel previously used as rest facility by various German organizations. It was similar to a hotel but without room

service. The food in a cafeteria on the main floor was adequate, thanks to UNRRA. By 9:00 pm we were in our beds, looking forward to a full and exciting day the following day.

We were not disappointed. The summit of Zugspitze was our destination that morning. We started out by boarding narrow-gauge rail cars that carried us upward toward this great mountain. The train stopped when it could climb no more and we got out to a scary sight: Cables strung on pylons carrying enclosed cages with people in them into the clouds. Occasionally the clouds would break and we could see the tip of the snow-covered mountaintop. Was this really where we were going? We got in line, chattering like magpies from excitement and fear.

Our turn came: We crowded into the cable car, the doors shut and we pulled away from the platform. I could not believe that all of us were hanging hundreds of meters from jagged rocks by a single cable. I did not like the feeling that came over me whenever I looked down, so I stared straight ahead or looked at my schoolmates who had fallen silent and had the look on their faces that I probably also had. The cable car swayed in the wind, not helping our disposition. We passed a car just like ours going down, smiling faces waving to us.

We stopped and got off at the platform on the summit. The cold air and snowbanks nearby surprised me even though we had been warned and worn our warmest clothing. A short walk and there we were, at the top of the world, or at least Europe...well at least Germany. The view was extraordinary and I began to understand why people risked their lives climbing mountains. From time to time clouds below us – clouds below us, can you believe such a concept? – would obscure our view. Tourists, soldiers and other kids were milling around, taking pictures with their box

cameras, as excited as we. Mountain peaks as far as the eye could see were marching to what we knew was Austria in one direction, Switzerland in the other. If it had not been for the cold I would have gladly spent the entire day here. Instead we walked into a kiosk to buy some postcards to bring home to our parents and aunts.

Back at the refugee camp, our physical education took place outside, weather permitting. Behind the school building were two sets of horizontal bars set up next to another structure consisting of vertical beams about seven or eight meters tall and about the same distance apart, connected with a horizontal beam on top. Suspended from that beam were several free-hanging wooden poles about as thick as an arm and ending approximately knee high from the ground. We would do chin ups on the horizontal bars and whatever self-taught gymnastics we could manage on our own. The wooden poles were for climbing hand over hand; our legs wrapped around the pole for support. These implements were for boys only. Nearby was a volleyball court that girls and boys would share, choosing up teams, and have regular games with the physical education teacher acting as a referee. A basketball court was set up in the *Kaserne* yard and was not very convenient for students during a school day. Elements of track and field were taught and plans were made to hold a meet the following summer.

Showers for bathing were a weekly affair. Friday evening sessions were for women and girls; on Saturdays men and boys had their turn. The coal-fired hot water boilers would be lit on those days by an older brother of one of my schoolmates named Buzikas. My schoolmate whom we called Bitinas was about my age but attended a lower grade. He had

lost an arm in a bombing that killed both of his parents. His right arm was amputated just above the elbow. The way it happened was that late in the war they were sheltered in an army barracks that was targeted by the British. The refugees had taken shelter in the basement but when the bombers came flying low, the people in the bomb shelter, hearing this horrendous noise, panicked and ran out into the parade grounds. Bitinas speculated that the bomber crews took them for soldiers and released anti-personnel bombs that practically shredded the running people on the open ground with cast iron shards from bombs designed to kill and maim people. He and his brother were fortunate to survive. Bitinas was a good student, learning to write left-handed.

On the scheduled hour, the shower facility doors would open leading to a changing room with wooden benches and hooks on the wall adjoining the large, tiled shower room itself.

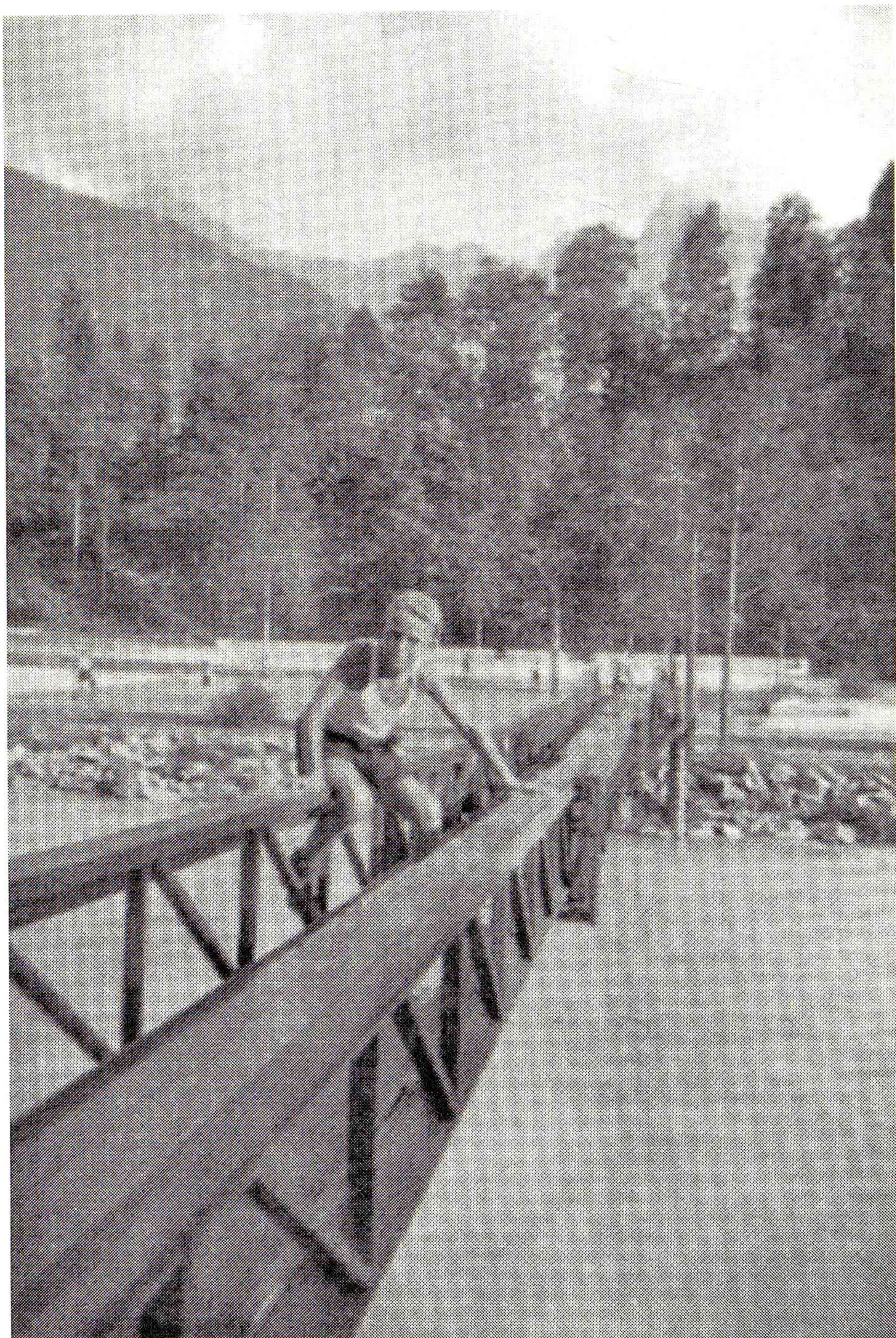
There were about a dozen showerheads and everyone supplied their own soap and towels. In an instant the room would be filled with steam so thick that you could hardly see the person next to you. There was no time limit specified for how long you could linger and us kids enjoyed fooling around, sneaking in buckets of cold water to spill on an unsuspecting friend, but courtesy dictated that you did not linger once you were done scrubbing yourself and not keep others waiting to get in. In our family, changing the bed linen coincided with the shower schedule. Washing up in the morning was mostly limited to the face and upper body.



Author's scout troop at Darius & Girenas scout camp, Auwaldsee, Ingolstadt, July 1947. Author is on far left.



Overview of Darius & Girenas scout camp, Auwaldsee, Ingolstadt, July 1947.



Author on the footbridge over the Isaar River,
Mittenwald, Bavaria, summer 1948.



Scout troop from Ingolstadt at the Lithuanian National Scout Camp at Mittenwald, in the Bavarian Alps, summer 1948. Author is on the far right.

Chapter 19

1947

In the spring of 1947, our school went on a second school outing. This one was to tour the Munich botanical gardens. Early one morning we gathered at the school where our teachers lined us up and marched us to the nearby *Nordbahnhof*. From there our train chugged off to the Munich *Hauptbahnhof*, making several stops in between, the last one in a medium-sized city called Dachau, the last stop before Munich. From the main train station it was not a long walk to the botanical gardens. Munich had been bombed extensively and there were ruins along the cleared streets, but the gardens seemed untouched by war. We marveled at the magnificent plants and flowers in the damp atmosphere and our teachers, with the help of guidebooks, rushed to name the various species. At noon we sat on benches and ate the sandwiches we had brought with us, thankful for the break in the boring routine. The train ride back to Ingolstadt seemed only minutes because we were so energized discussing what we had seen and by the break in the school routine. The teachers were visibly relieved to turn us back to our parents, some of whom had come to the station to meet us. It had been a new experience for all of us and our good behavior throughout

the day was rewarded with a promise of future outings.

Rumors were flying again regarding our fate. Some countries were opening their doors to refugees to immigrate but very few from our camp looked on them very favorably. United Kingdom and Belgium offered jobs in their coal mining industries, hard work underground for little pay. Most everyone waited for some positive movement from the United States or Canada. Australia was regarded as perhaps the third best option. That year it was Canada who was the first to welcome refugees from Europe, but unfortunately families were not welcome. Canada needed lumberjacks and if you were 21 to 35, single and passed their physical you were given a passage, a place to stay and a work contract stipulating pay, work rules and the number of months before you could seek other employment. Young, single women also were sought as maids and nannies; the age limit was 30 years. Perhaps eight or ten people from our camp packed their bags and were off to Canada.

The winter of '47 closed on the last of my grade school education. Our unusual school year was due to everyone's education having been disrupted by war. In March we crammed for the final exams, which included written and oral tests in all subjects except religion, music and art. Arithmetic was easy for me; my older friend and classmate Kostas, whom I helped to the best of my ability, failed that subject and would not continue to middle school. He was given an opportunity to study and take a new test but decided against it. We remained friends but soon he immersed himself in other interests, especially music, which he was good at; drumming being his favorite, accordion another. Lithuanian language was the hardest subject for me, I passed it but not with a large safety margin. History and geography were a breeze in comparison and I truly looked forward to entering the middle school in April, if for no other reason than to get

away from the humorless teacher I had been stuck with for the past two years.

The two-week scout camp at the beginning of July kept its promise as the highlight of the summer. UNRRA trucks delivered us to the woods near Auwaldsee with all of our camping gear, cooking utensils and food. The name of our camp was Camp Darius and Girenas, named for the two Lithuanian fliers who attempted to cross the Atlantic Ocean from New York and land in Kaunas but crashed a few hundred kilometers short of their goal in 1933. We anchored the ten-man tents and dug the toilet facilities about 150 meters away from the camp deeper in the woods, furnishing it with a log to sit on. When that was done, we unfolded our cots and lined them up inside the tent. There were no mattresses and only a blanket on the canvas cot with another blanket for cover and a small pillow at the end of the cot.

Some of us were then drafted to help Zulis Toliusis, one of our scout masters, who was the food manager and our chef, to set up his kitchen and build a suitable fireplace for cooking. Others scoured the nearby area for firewood. Our water source was a pump near the permanent camp buildings, about a half-kilometer from our site.

When our chores were complete, we were permitted as a group to go for a swim. The trip to the lake on our first day yielded a bonus for us. We found an abandoned rowboat near the shore that looked hopeless at first glance but one of our scout leaders who knew about these things deemed it salvageable. It was a big boat, like a lifeboat, which could easily seat a dozen or more adults.

The camp routine started in the morning with a formation. Each troop leader counted heads and reported to the scoutmaster who then ordered the raising of the flag while we stood at attention and gave it a three finger scout salute. Breakfast followed; porridge on most days with milk,

slices of bread and margarine with some fruit preserves. Once the housekeeping chores were completed, those of us who were not taking our turn performing kitchen duties would proceed on hikes, learning field craft and studying nature. Back at the camp we worked on learning to tie various knots and listened to lectures on life saving in water; in the afternoon we were off to the lake for more lessons on water safety and just plain swimming fun.

The mid-day meal was eagerly awaited and was the main meal of the day. Zulis was an exceptionally creative cook and did wonders with the meager stores in his possession. His mashed potatoes were a work of art. Vegetable dishes he created were noted for their variety and would have made a top French chef proud.

Rest period followed after the meal and then we could swim pretty much on our own. The afternoon swim was not mandatory and those scouts who were not that fond of water sports found their own interests such as wood carving and other crafts. The day would fly by, light supper and the evening formation called us with the lowering of the flag and all of us holding hands and singing "Taps:"

"Saule jau nusileido...Diev's ir cia..." (Sun has set...God is here...) the first and the last three words of the song. Guards were posted and rotated every two hours. My favorite turn was just before dawn; it wasn't fun getting up at 4:00 am, but the silent breaking of dawn and seeing the first light of the day made up for it.

Several of us volunteered to work on fixing the boat. The hull was in decent shape but visible openings between the boards needed to be caulked. We heated and spread tar into these openings and poured buckets of water into the inside of the boat to see how badly it leaked. By the third day the hull seemed completely sealed; the boards having expanded from the water that we had dumped in to it. It was

ready to float. We rolled it on its side and dumped the water out of it. It took a dozen of us pushing and pulling to get it in the water. Finally it slid in to the lake and stayed upright, straight and dry inside. Several of us climbed in; the boat hardly rocking as we boarded it. Now we needed something to make it go; there were no oars and not much hope to find any. The problem was solved with several short boards that would serve as paddles after we carved comfortable hand holds in them. We would not break any speed records on the lake but at least we could travel to and around the island.

That evening, which ended one of the long days of summer, after “Taps” we had our first lake outing. With our scout leader Bucinkas, who was my German language teacher in the lead, about fifteen of us set out to paddle our ship, which we had not yet named, around the small island. The sun had just set but at least an hour of light remained. We set out to our right to circle the island counterclockwise. No one and nothing rushed us, we took turns with the paddles; the water was flat like a mirror. There was no wind and the sky promised a starry night. Someone started a song and all of us joined in. One song followed another and it seemed that we harmonized surprisingly well for an impromptu group. As we rounded the island and started back toward our beach, we pulled out our paddles out of the water and just floated. The stars had just come out and someone started to hum the tune for “*Lietuva Brangi*,” (“Cherished Lithuania”) a poem by Maironis. We all joined in, quietly at first as if not wanting to intrude on nature: “*Grazi tu, mano brangi tevyne*, (You are beautiful, dear homeland,)

Salis kur miega kapuos didvyriai... (Land where heroes sleep in graves...)

Ne veltui bociai Tave taip gyne, (No wonder the ancestors defended you so,)

Ne veltui dainiai placiai isgyre. (No wonder bards praised

you widely.)

By the time we finished the last stanza our boat had drifted to shore but none of us wanted to move. No one said anything, the song had brought memories to each of us, memories we had no need to share out loud because in our minds each of us was home, a thousand kilometers away. In the distance we heard what sounded like applause. We looked around, and there, about several dozen meters away, stood a group of German girls in their nightgowns. They had heard us singing and came out of their camp building to listen. Their applause was the final touch to make the evening truly memorable.

When we broke camp and said goodbye to Auwaldsee, we left the boat where we had found it. There would be another camp for some of us later that summer. YMCA had organized several large camps and maintained them during the entire summer for the refugee children. Ours was in Bavaria, near Lake Chiemsee, about halfway between Munich and Salzburg. Our two-week stay was scheduled in August and again we boarded UNRRA trucks with our possessions. The camp was huge, separated into groups by nationalities of the campers. We Lithuanians had two large tents accommodating about thirty of us. The other nationalities included Latvians, Ukrainians and Poles, with the Ukrainians having the largest contingent at the time we were there. The camp was run by an administrator whom we seldom saw, but the activities director position was held by two Latvians, who we all thought were circus acrobats. Both were very muscular and could perform handstands on each other as well as handsprings and would do somersaults at a drop of a hat. The two of them were like two peas in a pod and I never saw just one of them alone.

Loudspeakers would blast revile, just like in the army. We had about thirty minutes to wash up, to make our bunks

to strict specifications, have everything put away in a certain order, make sure that the tent flaps were even and tied off correctly and the surrounding area was immaculate. While we were off to breakfast, a committee formed from all nationalities would inspect inside and outside each tent and later in the day would announce the winner, the best-maintained and most orderly tent. The prize was permission to be the first in line for meals as well as choice activities such as boating. The winning tent was also awarded a special pennant. During our stay in that camp we never won first place; the honors almost always went to one of the Ukrainian tents. They cheated but we did not care, the Ukrainians would get up a half hour earlier and go to ridiculous extremes to earn that first place pennant.

Meals were skimpy and we were constantly hungry. There was very little free time and, in addition to the normal camp activities, we needed to practice songs and skits that all campers were expected to perform at a joint campfire on Saturday nights. Not just our own songs, we were expected to learn and perform a song in a foreign language; a lottery draw determined that we sing in Polish. In turn we submitted a Lithuanian song to the Poles, choosing something easy and short. We had the better deal because Polish language was not strange to our ears. The Polish boys had a much harder time learning ours and coaching them on pronunciation produced less than satisfactory results. After their performance at the campfire we nevertheless applauded them with enthusiasm.

Swimming in Lake Chiemsee was our favorite activity. There was a pier perhaps 35 meters long, ending where the water was deep and we could dive or jump into it with a running start. There were too many kids at the camp to accommodate them all at the same time, so we took turns by nationality. The water was clear and cool but not cold.

Jumping and diving off the pier was a new experience for most of us and we did not waste our allotted time by sunbathing. There were several rowboats tied to the pier near the shore and we were scheduled to take one of them out the next afternoon. The boat could only seat ten campers so our allotted time had to be split in half if there would be more than ten willing boaters. As it later turned out one boat excursion on Lake Chiemsee was more than enough.

We set out late in the afternoon. The day had been sunny and warm but by mid-afternoon dark clouds appeared in the north and were moving toward us. The lake was calm, it was either go now in spite of the storm moving toward us, or wait another week for our turn. We decided to go but stay close to the pier and rush back if the storm hit. Our boat was a typical small rowboat, unlike the one we salvaged at Auwaldsee. By the time ten of us were on board, it sat deep in the water and any decent sized wave would wash over the side. One oar on each side and two of the bigger kids struggled with them at first, not having had any previous rowing experience. After a while the boys found their rhythm and we pulled away from the pier. The scenery was magnificent – mountains in the distance, woods surrounding the lake, our camp much prettier from the lake's surface. As the wind picked up and the water became ruffled there were calls for turning back. While we were deciding what to do the wind became stronger and the decision was made for us: We go back!

It was easier said than done. As we pointed the boat toward the camp the waves driven by the wind kept our forward progress practically at a standstill. The inexperience of the oarsmen made things worse; we could not manage a steady course toward the pier. I suddenly felt fear, realizing that if the boat capsized or sank I was too far away from shore to swim. I saw panic in the eyes of others, especially

when our boat started to take on water from the sloshing waves and rain. One of the older kids by the nickname of Stankus told the rowers to move over and he took both oars. He was strong and he knew what he was doing; slowly we gained headway. We all bailed with everything we had; a beat-up old pot, a can we found on the floor and our bare hands. Lightning flashed but thankfully it was far away. Rain increased in intensity but by then we were closer to shore and the waves no longer slowed our forward progress. Finally our boat bumped into the pier and we piled out, barely remembering to tie up the boat. Stankus was the hero and each of us knew it and thanked him, shaking his wrist because his hands had fresh and painful blisters.

We had been writing letters to our parents from the very first day, describing our surroundings and activities. The meager meals we described must have caused some concern because to my surprise one day in the second week I was told that I had a visitor. There was our mother carrying a mesh bag full of food, including apples and pears. I have never been so happy to see anyone as I was hugging and thanking her. She had managed to come to Chiemsee by rail and walked the last 5 kilometers to the camp. Mothers! What wonderful creatures they are!

By the end of August, the YMCA camp was just a memory. I entered the second half of my first middle school class. Mr. Salcius was our homeroom teacher and in addition to the continuation of the basic subjects we had language courses in German and English. I was concerned more about English because it was a tough subject with many rules and pronunciation of words that often did not resemble what was written. The first thing we learned during the early spring

session was the alphabet, which when written did not differ that much from Lithuanian or German but when spoken some of it sounded not the way what you would expect. Fortunately we had an excellent teacher who by profession was a dentist. She had attended a university in England and was a considerate and compassionate person who genuinely liked kids. Bucinskas, our German language teacher, was our scoutmaster and a strict teacher, the knowledge of the language I already possessed was not much help to me when we were hit with German grammar. I had to buckle down as never before in order to bring home good grades.

For a very brief period of time in the fall of 1947, our school schedule was disrupted by Hollywood. A movie, starring Montgomery Clift, called *The Search* was being shot in Germany. Hollywood agents had found the Ingolstadt's bombed-out main railway station most suitable for their needs and they required a lot of extras – children who looked like orphans freed from a concentration camp to complete the scene where Mr. Clift, with an orphan he befriended, is looking for the orphan's mother and she in turn is searching for her son in the refugee camps. An agent came to our school and after conferring with school administration asked for volunteers who were no older than fourteen. All of us jumped at the chance to be in the movies and on a designated afternoon, we dressed in our worst and were taken to the railway station. There, after waiting and shuffling around for what seemed like days, we finally formed lines and walked up and down the platforms while the lights blazed and the cameras rolled. Others claimed to have seen the star Montgomery Clift, but I did not and if I had I don't know if I would have recognized him. He was not Clark Gable or Errol Flynn and I did not find out if the orphan and his mother, together with Montgomery Clift, ever located each other and if the movie was a success. I never saw the movie.

Before the cold weather came at the end of November and the ice froze between the bunkers, I had acquired ice skates. They were figure skates, the kind that you strap on and tighten on to the soles and the heels of your shoes with a special key. It is important that the soles and the heel are stiff and in good condition and that would be my main problem. Footwear was scarce and difficult to obtain in the refugee camps. Nevertheless I was determined to skate even if the skate clamps ruined my shoes. That did not sit well with my parents, but as I said, I was determined. One Sunday afternoon in early December I bundled up, tossed the skates over my shoulder and set out for the ice rink. My first effort at skating was a disaster. I needed to hold on to the bench just to keep my feet from sliding from under me. I moved from bench to bench or whatever I could lean on and before too long I was standing unsupported and taking small steps forward. By the end of the afternoon I was tired and sore from so many spills, but I was pleased with my progress and looked forward to the coming winter.

Events several thousand miles away were shaping our future, but all we knew in early 1948 were rumors and speculation. Emigration was always the big subject in our camp and our preferred first choice, the U.S., appeared reluctant to accept refugees. The talk was that the presidential contender Thomas Dewey, campaigning for president in an election to be held in the fall, argued for the need to protect jobs for the returning veterans who were reentering the civilian job market. Harry Truman, the current president, said there was enough work for everybody and if elected he would sign a special immigration bill permitting 100,000 refugees from Europe to come to the United States. The election would

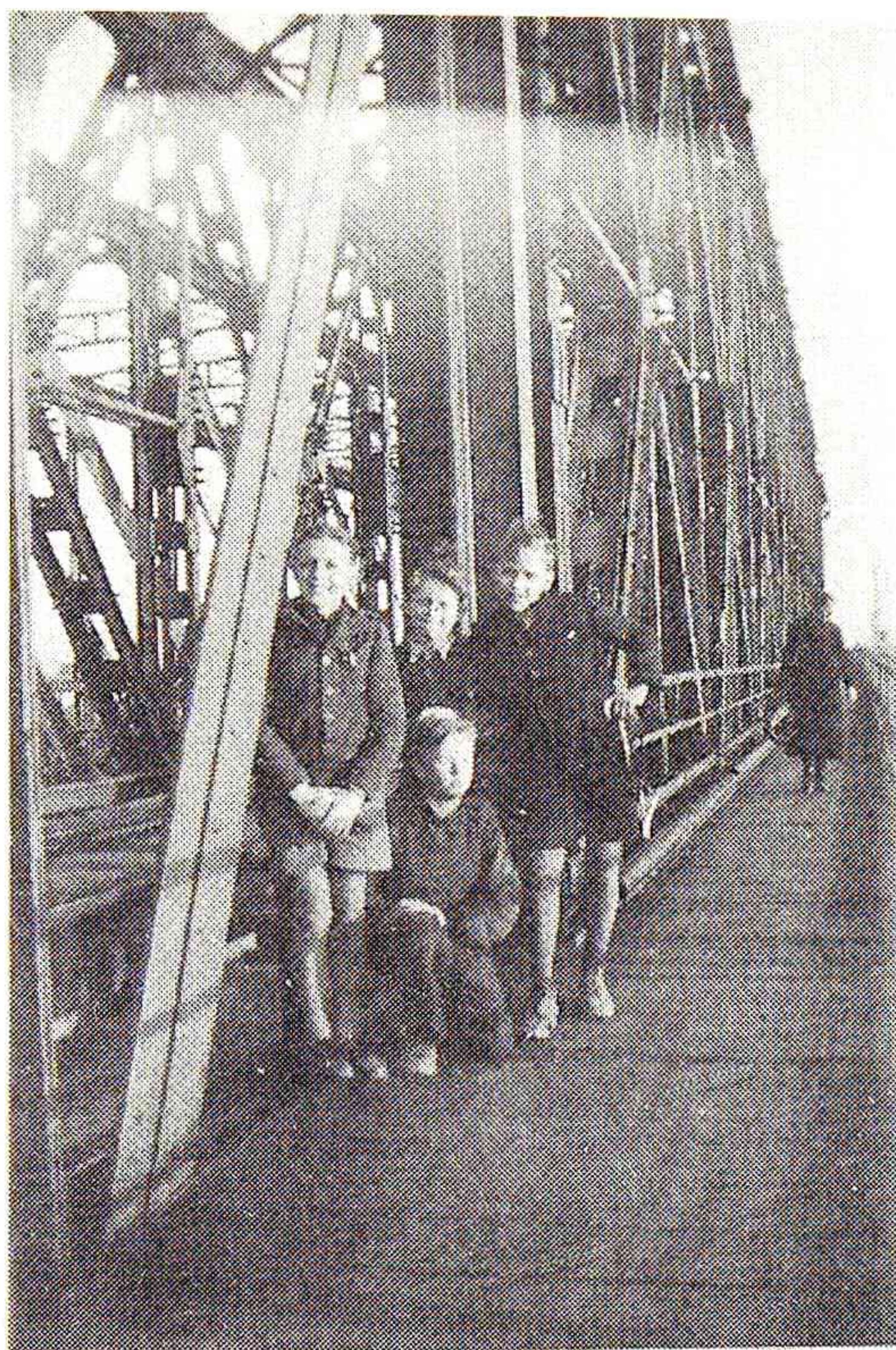
take place in the fall and we all prayed for Truman's victory.

In the meantime, Australia cracked its doors open to refugee families but it was evident that they were choosy and Northern Europeans were given preference. Happily that included us, and our family decided that we might not wait for the United States to reach a decision but to apply for immigration application with the Australian consul's office, thinking that a bird in hand is better than a distant and uncertain promise of something better.

In 1948 we celebrated the 30th anniversary of Lithuania's independence. The exact day was February 16; scouts and other organizations had been preparing to commemorate this event and, after a solemn mass in church, we gathered in front of the *Kaserne* for raising the national tri-color flag. Speeches followed the ceremony and we stood there in our best uniforms, our teeth chattering from the cold. Later in the afternoon there was a concert at the recreation hall/movie theater of patriotic songs sung by the men's choir, folk dancing, reading of poetry and more speeches expressing the hope of being home the following year. To me thirty years ago seemed like ancient times and yet our parents already were adults at that time. My father joined the Lithuanian volunteer force, which later became the army; several years later our mother moved to Klaipeda to successfully work toward the annexation of the Klaipeda region to independent Lithuania, where on the 10th anniversary of Lithuania's independence she was awarded a medal by President Smetona. In Klaipeda, she met Father, married him and this was where my brother and I were born.

That winter I became a decent skater, moving forward and backward to music when it played on weekends in the park and joining the impromptu hockey competitions at other times. Between my skating and homework, I learned to play chess and on days that were too wet for skating I

would spend time in the day center playing ping pong if I could manage to scrounge up a ball or play chess, which I did not particularly like, but it seemed important to learn because all my friends played and I had to keep up.



Railway bridge over the Danube River at Ingolstadt, June 1947. Karolis "Charlie" Jautakis at left, author in the center, Arvydas at right, "Chura" Trumpickas kneeling.



Ice skating with a group of friends and schoolmates in the park in Ingolstadt, 1948. Author is fourth from the left, at front.



Lithuanian school building and playground in Ingolstadt, spring 1949. Author is on the left, Arvydas center, Charlie on the right.

Chapter 20

Summer of 1948

My English course grades took a turn for the worse that spring. Our teacher, the dentist, could no longer teach and perform in dentistry due to the heavy load of her primary profession. Another lady took her place and it was evident from day one that the new teacher's knowledge of the English language was very limited. It happened that UNRRA committee visited our school in the first week of her taking over the English class. The committee members represented several different nationalities but this time their common language was English rather than German as it had been in the past. The new teacher was pressed into service as translator and her struggle to understand and to translate what was being said was visible even to us who understood even less. The fact that she was not proficient in her subject should not have affected my grade and yet something in me became disconnected, as I compared the two teachers and felt less respect for the new one. Part of it was the strictness of her approach to her teaching that I thought was a cover up for her lack of proficiency. Her pronunciation of English words, especially in instances where we could compare them to the previous teacher's, was noticeably different and the fact

that she insisted that her way was correct, seemed to affect my attitude and showed up in my grade.

The scouts that spring and early summer were busier than ever. Our scout camp was to be held in the Alps; commemorating the 30th anniversary of Lithuania's independence this camp was named the Third National Jamboree. Lithuanian scouts from every refugee camp in Western Germany were asked to gather in Mittenwald, Bavarian Alps, later that summer. We wanted to look sharp and be competitive in sports and other scouting activities with other scout troops. We were told that the top Lithuanian scout leaders would be present and observe our preparedness and efficiency. Looking forward to camping in the Alps, proud that we would continue the tradition of a National Scout Jamboree in exile and sad that it would take place more than a thousand kilometers from where it really belonged, we rehearsed new songs composed for that occasion.

Our father had not been feeling well all of that winter. His stomach bothered him most days and he complained of indigestion. He had lost weight and by early summer he was in constant pain. Home remedies were of no help and our local doctor Leskauskas suggested that he have a more thorough examination at the refugee hospital in Eichstatt, where they had x-rays and other diagnostic equipment and where two years earlier I had my appendix taken out.

In mid-June our parents took a train and stayed in the refugee camp there while father underwent a thorough examination at the hospital. The doctors concluded that stomach ulcers were the likely cause of the pain. They prescribed some medication, placed him on a very strict diet, told him not to smoke and to come back in three weeks. If the diet and medication did not result in an improvement, the doctors said that surgery would be needed followed by a lengthy hospitalization. It was clear that this was a serious situation

and Father's health was in grave jeopardy.

The start of the Jamboree coincided with Father's second trip to the hospital, this time for surgery. If anything, during those three weeks, his pain worsened and he was ready for any procedure, risky or not, to relieve the pain. Our mother would accompany him and I thought that it might be a good idea for me to skip the camp trip in order to stay closer to the family. Mother's wisdom prevailed as usual: "It will not be helpful for you to mope around the camp while your friends are having this once in a lifetime experience," she said. "I will be with him and if anything happens that you should know, I will get word to you somehow."

We packed up and left for camp a few days before Father's scheduled trip to the hospital. When we changed trains in Munich and stood around the platform waiting for the Mittenwald connection, we soon were surrounded by Lithuanian boy and girl scouts in uniforms led by their scoutmasters. For the older scouts and the scoutmasters it was a reunion after a number of difficult years. There were scouts representing refugee enclaves from other cities in Germany with whom we only had contact by mail. In some instances there had been no contact at all between brother and sister scouts who had not seen each other since before leaving Lithuania. Many of the scoutmasters had camped at the Second National Jamboree in 1938. The rail trip to our final destination was literally filled with war stories, as each person had his or her own tales of close calls of escape from the communists and from bombs from the skies. Before we reached Mittenwald, we heard the special song composed for this occasion and which we had rehearsed in the previous months:

Vejo skundas, vejas is rytu, (Wind's lament, wind is from the east,)

Atnesa i mus skunda, (Brings to us a complaint)

Panemunes vienisu silu... (Of Panemune's lonely pine woods...)

Panemune, with its beautiful pine forest, had hosted the previous National Scout Jamboree. Scouting was no longer permitted there and the following stanza of this song asks the west wind to carry the echoes of our song to the now bare pine woods.

The site for the Jamboree in Mittenwald was ideal. We put up our tents on a wooded slope, less than 100 meters from the cold Isaar River, whose rapid flow over the rocks could be heard day and night. The campsite was spacious and our nearest neighbors, boy scouts from Bielefeld, could not be seen because of the rolling, wooded landscape. Mornings and evenings all campers would heed a bugle call to gather at a central square where we would stand at attention and salute the raising and the lowering of the national flag and sing the national anthem. On the first Sunday of the camp, after a mass held by the senior chaplain at a makeshift altar in the central square, we formed ranks and marched through Mittenwald on their main thoroughfare along the river. I often wondered what the local population thought seeing us marching and singing in a language they probably had never heard before.

Not far from our camp, there was a wider spot in the river where the current was not as swift, the grassy slope permitting easy access. To some of us, not a camp would be complete without swimming. It was only natural that several of us decided to test the water temperature and the current. We carefully waded over submerged rocks up to our knees, toes already numb from the cold. None of us was brave enough to get fully immersed. We splashed each other for a few minutes and decided that swimming in Isaar was for polar bears and not for us. Proof of that came very soon, when one of the older kids, Algis Banys, dove in and had to

be pulled out and taken to the hospital in town with hypothermia. Later that day our bulletin board sprouted notices prohibiting swimming in the river, reminding us that the river water had been melting snow only a few hours and several kilometers away.

Our campfires were the essence of scouting and here in Mittenwald, with hundreds of participants, boys and girls who had been preparing themselves for this day for months with skits and songs, the campfires to me were the highlights to always be remembered. The fun and frivolity was mixed in equal measure with patriotism, recalling the tragic fate of our homeland and the resolve to work and keep faith in the eventual independence from the red menace. I was happy and proud to be a part of this organization and to be associated with other like-minded scouts.

The trip home by train, first to Munich, then to Ingolstadt was full of trepidation and concern for Father's health. Aunt Antanina was the first one to greet me and explained that Father's surgery the week before had been very difficult, but he was recovering and Mother was with him at the hospital. How long he would remain hospitalized was not clear. The surgeons had removed a part of his stomach and a considerable amount of intestines. The good news was that it was not cancer and if he was able to avoid infection and other complications, he would recover and be able to lead a normal life. I made my own plans to visit him in the hospital by borrowing a bicycle from a friend of my Aunt Vincenta, a former farmer from Samogitia by the name of Mileris. They had a daughter a few years younger than me by the name of Lucy. The following day I set out for Eichstatt on the borrowed bike.

On my way there, on a fast downhill run, the chain came off the sprocket, tangled in the rear wheel and I took a spill. I had scrapes and bruises and my shirt sleeve had torn.

I cleaned myself with a handkerchief and water from a ditch. I then untangled the bicycle chain, straightened out the wheel spokes as best as I could and slowly rode to the hospital.

Entering my father's room I found Mother, who looked at me and I could tell that I had just given a reason for more concern. Even though I was not hurt, I looked a mess and told her I would explain what happened as soon as I said hello to Father. He had been asleep under some heavy medication and he barely recognized me. According to Mother, the doctors had taken him back to surgery the day before because they had detected bleeding and had to find and fix the source.

I explained to my mother about the bicycle trip and she in turn told me she would not have permitted it had she been home. Mothers are always right and I promised her that I would take my time riding back; as if I had a choice because the rear wheel was wobbly and I was not even sure that I could ride all the way back to Ingolstadt. She told me she would stay there for a few more days and for me not to worry because the worst for my father had already passed and he would recover. Slowly, but he would recover.

I told Mother about our scout camp in the Alps and passed on good wishes from her friend Girdvainyte, the librarian in Telsiai who was a lifelong scout and had accompanied other scout masters to Mittenwald but had not stayed there. We had met in the train station in Munich and I told her about Father's health problems. She asked me to tell Mom that she would visit her in Ingolstadt early in the fall and to give my best to the family. I also told Mom that there had been a newspaper reporter at the Jamboree and to expect stories and pictures in the next issue. My father was asleep when I left the hospital and climbed on the bicycle for the 26 kilometer ride to Ingolstadt. It took a long time and with each passing kilometer I told myself that this was one less that I

would need to walk if the bike broke down. I made it back to our *Kaserne* before dark.

Three weeks later Father came home. People seeing him for the first time hardly recognized him. He was a mere skeleton and except for his height he would have been a total stranger to them. He walked slowly and seemed to be in pain, but he did not complain and generally did not speak much, as if conserving his strength. We were all aware that he needed to regain weight and strength if we were to emigrate anywhere. There was no chance that he would pass a physical examination in order to qualify for any type of manual labor. His meals became our number one priority. Mother and our aunts supplemented our UNRRA rations with bartered high-calorie foods like butter, sour cream and cheese, made sure he drank fresh milk instead of the “ersatz” coffee which had no food value and might even aggravate his stomach. It was not too long before we could tell that he was recovering and feeling better when we spotted him smoking a cigarette.

The rest of the summer days skimmed along at a fast pace for us kids. The year before we had discovered a municipal swimming pool and this year we took full advantage of it. Auwaldsee Lake was too far to go there every day and the city pool was a short walk from the *Kaserne*. It was a good-sized facility with changing rooms and a shallow end for smaller kids. We enjoyed jumping in and diving and chasing each other but it was not that great for actual swimming because it was usually crowded with the local German kids. The entry fee was minimal and Mom was glad to fund it knowing how much we enjoyed water sports and also to get us out of the crowded room we called home.

The school year began with a smaller enrollment than in the

past years. Emigration was thinning our ranks. My classes became more intense with the addition of algebra and geometry to the curriculum. In general, my grades were decent and I did better than just “pass” in Lithuanian language, managed to stay above sinking in English and I struggled with algebra, something that mystified me, because I liked the subject but always seemed a step behind the teacher. He had a good reputation and was a professional mathematics teacher but he always seemed in a hurry and had little patience for explanations. Geometry was taught by a different teacher and I did well without too much effort on my part.

IRO, or the International Relief Organization, took over the running of the camps from UNRRA. The change was noticeable because our food rations became smaller in the variety of goods that we received. All changes pointed to the need for us to emigrate somewhere where we would be safe and be able to put down our roots. The political situation did not point to us returning to Lithuania soon, perhaps not even in our lifetime. The month of November did bring us some good news: Harry Truman won the presidential election in the United States and that meant that everyone’s chances for immigrating to the U.S. has gone up. We had applied for immigration to Australia and some of our neighbors had already departed for the transit camp in Augsburg for final processing. Our turn would come before too long and we hoped that Father would be fully recovered by the time our turn came up.



Students and teachers of Vincas Kudirka Lithuanian Middle School, Ingolstadt, summer 1947. Author stands second from right, fourth row from bottom; Arvydas is the fifth student on the author's right.



Author in front of Albrecht Kaserne, winter 1949.



Author's class, Vincas Kudirka Lithuanian Middle School, Ingolstadt, 1949. Author is second from right; Donius Remys, substitute homeroom teacher, is at center.

Chapter 21

1949

Aufviedersehn Germany

The rapidly dwindling population of our camp in Ingolstadt forced changes in the school year and the consolidations of classes within nearby cities. The upper classes had already been transferred to Eichstatt and the latest move was to Munich. It was rationalized that the older kids could live away from their home and parents in closely supervised dormitories. Due to the loss of teachers in the lower grades, up to grade four, my brother's grade, our school year ended at the end of March. Anticipating that most of us would emigrate to English-speaking countries, the school board provided us with grade certificates with English translation. The board also provided an explanation of the Lithuanian secondary school curriculum listing the subjects and the number of hours each class must take each week. Together with the grade certificate any future school I would apply for would have a fair picture of my scholastic achievement.

Our family was preparing for the first step in the immigration process to Australia. Once again Aunt Antanina and Aunt Vincenta would travel with us as members of our

family. Augsburg transit camp would be our stop. We read all we could about the country of our future and we assumed that the Australian Immigration Service would locate us in the more populated part of the continent, such as in Sydney or Melbourne but we did not know that as a fact. We had no say in the matter and we would accept whatever was offered by way of work, schooling (if any) and living quarters. The temperate, relatively warm climate in southern Australia appealed to me and I could picture myself on a beach in my spare time. To make that a reality, a number of pieces had to fall into place; getting through the physical examination for our parents was our largest concern. We had heard from people who had preceded us through that transit camp that the health standards for immigrants to Australia were very strict.

Some of our friends and schoolmates had emigrated and settled in the United States and Canada and we looked forward to hearing from them. My first letter was from Efke, my next-door neighbor. He and his mother had settled in Canada, a small city near Toronto, and he had gone to work as an apprentice in a machine shop, something that he liked and was good at. My brother received a letter also from Canada, from his buddy nicknamed Chura, last name Trumpickas, who also was a good artist and who was now studying in a middle school in Hamilton, Ontario. Their lack of language proficiency was their biggest complaint, but they also wrote that that would change quickly. My first letter from the U.S. was from Algis Grigaravicius, my brother's classmate but my age and friend. His family found a home in Chicago, with his father's relatives. His cousin, a few years older than Algis, took him under his wing and would enroll him in his own Catholic high school in the fall. He wrote that his father worked in a factory and that they were happy. In his letter he included a menthol cigarette and a paper match. Whatever the

joke he intended, he kept it to himself.

In June, we found ourselves on the way to Augsburg, saying goodbye to friends and schoolmates who were waiting for their turn to move out. A few days before our move Father took a screwdriver and a hammer and dismantled the plywood cover on the transom that sat on top of our door leading into our room. Rolled inside a burlap bag, covered with an oily rag, was a Walther pistol and a clip full of ammunition. He never told us how long it was stuck there over our door, but from some of the things he had said at the time we were threatened with forced deportation, I suspected that he had acquired it before that nightmarish event. Now that we were about to emigrate he would not need it any more and he had found a buyer for it. He told us that he hoped he would never have a need for another gun.

In Augsburg we moved into wooden barracks, hauled our belongings to the second floor, which was fairly empty at that time, and made ourselves at home. It was hot up there during the day and there was not much to do except wait to be called to one or another commission. In addition to filling out forms pretty much detailing our lives, we met face to face with members of the commission who questioned us through interpreters or in German through my mother. Many of these questions were to determine our political views and to ensure that no Nazis or communists slipped in to Australia. Another inquiry was regarding my parents' previous occupations and work experience so that suitable work could be found for us. This made sense, and my mother stressed my father's upbringing as a farmer. His police background would be of no use in Australia.

It took two weeks with much waiting in between commissions before the final stop in the transit process. It was the dreaded physical and the dreaded wait for the results after the thorough examination by several doctors. We

learned that a suitable number of potential immigrants had already been selected and would be put on a train to Genoa, Italy, within the next few days. From there a ship would transit Suez and make its way to Australia. Fate dictated that we would not board that ship. We were informed that Father did not pass the physical due to the fairly recent and massive surgery.

Back to Ingolstadt, back to *Albrecht Kaserne*. Now it was even less crowded than when we left for Augsburg few weeks ago. Our immigration to Australia setback was a shock, but not entirely unanticipated. Because of the possibility of being rejected, our family had taken steps to catch the last wave of immigration to the United States. The 100,000 refugee quota that the Truman Bill covered was rapidly being filled and, while there was a push in Congress to double that number, we could not risk that it would pass and we would be left behind in Germany or perhaps have to move to Brazil or Argentina. We rushed our application to the U.S. together with signed documents guaranteeing housing and work. These documents were prepared for us by the Mileris family who had gone to the U.S. in early spring to a large farm, actually an estate of several thousand acres near Chazy, a stone's throw from the Canadian border in upstate New York. Sponsoring relatives and friends was a common practice: Those who successfully immigrated made it possible for others to follow them. The guarantee of work and residence was not enforced and the guarantor did not need to be a citizen, only a legal resident, and it was largely a formality to ensure that the new immigrants would not be a burden on the state. Mileris was our family sponsor but his guarantee did not include Aunt Vincénta, who chose a distant relative to prepare her documents to live and work in Pittsburg, Pennsylvania. This would be temporary and she would join us as soon as we settled in.

By mid-September we were back in a transit camp, this time in Munich, where refugees were being processed to immigrate to the United States. Procedures similar to what we had experienced in Augsburg were being followed, except that there was more emphasis on screening out former Nazis or their sympathizers and a much less strenuous physical examination. If you breathed and managed to walk, you had a good chance of passing. It seemed likely that this health examination was mainly to screen out communicable diseases and because a large number of Jews in the 100,000 quota were former concentration camp inmates, it would have been a rare case among them who had survived with their health intact.

Munich was more fun for us than Augsburg. The city was beginning to recover from the war, although bomb damage remained everywhere. Our presence there coincided with Oktoberfest, one of Bavaria's traditional celebrations. There was music in the streets, natives in their "*lederhosen*" attire, wearing hats with feathers, pounding out dance music in outdoor beer bars in the evenings. There was dancing and considerable consumption of beer, especially by the American soldiers stationed there, the 11th Airborne Division, who had fought in the Pacific, and had a reputation for rowdiness. The local currency now was the "D" mark, the recently introduced *Deutschesmark* that was the new currency and its value was ten times what their previous *Reichsmark* had been. Unfortunately we had none of the new marks and the best we could do was to sneak into some of the movie theaters playing the latest Hollywood productions and hang around the bands and dancers until evening when we would make our way back to the transit camp.

Mid-October found us on a train to Bremen, the demarcation port for our ship that would carry us to New York and a new life. The entire train was full of refugees, the

kind of train ride I hoped never to experience again, although unlike our previous trips we were given sandwiches and apples to eat and we all had places to sit. Our immediate destination was the final transit camp near the harbor, where we would be questioned for the last time by the Nazi-hunting commission. One more night in barracks and we would board the ship and wave good bye to Germany and the Old Continent. I would not miss Germany but was sad to part with friends and schoolmates that we got to know in the refugee camp in Ingolstadt, friendships that would last a lifetime because we had shared a unique experience. We were about to quadruple the distance from our true homeland, Samogitia, with a real possibility that I might never see it again. I knew I must not lose hope and promised myself that I would lead the kind of life no matter where I lived or what kind of work I performed that would make my Samogitian ancestors proud. For centuries they fought invaders and many gave their lives for that precious corner of earth on the Baltic shore. In the end, what I wanted most was their acceptance of me in their midst under the sacred oak trees in Samogitia patria una.

Epilog

Our ship, a converted troop carrier for refugees, docked in New York harbor after a stormy Atlantic crossing on October 29, 1949. We were greeted by a brass band and a number of politicians who made speeches on the occasion of the 100,000th immigrant to come to the United States on our ship. This wave of immigrants was the result of special legislation passed by U.S. Congress and signed by the President Harry S. Truman.

It was a different country then. It had just defeated the Nazis and the Japanese and had the technology to assure the citizens that no one else could challenge Uncle Sam in a battle. Unlike other world powers, the United States did not seek territory or dominance over others except to maintain peace. It was proud of its past, deferential to its Constitution, holding sacred Declaration of Independence and the Bill of Rights, and confident in the future. “Made in the U.S.” was the standard everyone else sought to match; anything worth producing was made in the U.S., giving its people a living standard not seen before on this planet. In turn this opened opportunities for people like us that could not be found anywhere else. We were just the latest wave of immigrants who followed Scandinavians, Italians and Greeks, Irish and

Germans coming before us. Each wave experienced hardships in the beginning and conquered them. We would meet them head on and overcome them also.

It is not my intent here to describe my or my family's life in the new country. A few highlights, however, are necessary to round out my tale of childhood and adolescence before reaching these shores. My experiences and lessons I learned during and after the war in Europe set the pattern for a great deal of my attitude and a number of events in my life, which I set in motion and I tried to control to the best of my ability. These had been interesting times we have lived in, given the fact that my youth and adulthood stretched over the most eventful decades in history: The second half of the twentieth century. Technology moved at nearly the speed of light and ideologies once cast in iron were discredited and discarded. "The Thousand Year Reich" lived about as long as an average house cat, Marxism and Communism, "the wave of the future," died also except in North Korea and our academia. We worked, adapted and survived. Today I am reasonably satisfied with the results of my choices. I would not change much even if such possibility was granted to me.

My father died of stroke a month after I graduated from high school. I had worked part time through all four years of high school. In 1954 I went to work full time, squeezed in a hitch in the U.S. Army, mustering out in 1959. I retired in 2007 but kept my hand in as a consultant for another year. Observing the "brick man" in Ingolstadt served me well and I never forgot him. His example would not permit me to think that any work was too tedious and beneath me or not worth doing. It was work, it benefited someone and there was compensation for it. The "brick man" may well have dedicated his work to God, because I doubt if in the very beginning he could foresee any earthly compensation. His discipline left a deep impression on me

and possibly on some others, so perhaps that too is his compensation.

Conservatism and I embraced each other. To me it seemed as natural as breathing to reject what socialism, which I consider to be “communism light,” was teaching and preaching. Entitlements to some at the expense of others, guaranteed equal outcome regardless of size and effort of input and talent, wealth redistribution, government intrusion into family life, mandatory unionization, perversion of language such as calling abortion “choice.” In the U.S., the two-party system kept socialism in check and left the progressives and their ilk an insignificant minority.

Capitalism had succeeded in lifting the working people not only out of poverty but also gave them a measure of prosperity while maintaining the doors open for entrepreneurs and others to gain wealth. And yet slowly and steadily the country was pushed to the left when the liberals were in power and it did not reverse much if any when conservatives took over.

The country took a hard left turn when the people elected and reelected a president who had been a community organizer steeped in Marxism and mentored by communists. His friends and his preacher in Hyde Park openly hated America. The media ignored all that and swooned whenever he spoke promising hope, open government, good jobs for all and receding oceans. I knew who he was already when he became our senator but hoped that he would not do irreparable harm when he strode away from the fake Greek columns and into the top job in the country. More of our freedom eroded; elections have consequences. In a free country, everything is permitted except that which has been prohibited by law or custom. In socialism everything is prohibited except that which the government chooses to allow. Today we are halfway to socialism.

The race inequality issue at the time of our arrival had been festering for decades. It had to be addressed and fixed. Segregation of the races was not limited to the southern States; we could see it in Chicago in schools, parks and beaches. Major legislation was passed in the 60's with liberals wrongfully taking credit. Laws were put in place for equal rights; people's attitudes still had ways to go. I found it interesting that the word "bigot" was tossed around freely at conservatives then and continues even to this day by liberals feeling good about themselves and their noble intentions. I did not flout my conservative views, nor did I hide them. Whenever liberal co-workers or even left leaning casual friends discovered that I was a conservative they automatically assumed I was prejudiced against the blacks. According to them I had to be a bigot. They neither sought nor required any other proof of my beliefs. I attribute that to their liberal education and the need for progressives to continue to have victims who will empower them and lift them above the masses who they despise. Conservative = bigot assumption happened without fail and each time there was a smug look on their face and they were always wrong. This was in large part due to my experience with black soldiers in Germany in the months that followed the end of war. Bigotry in me would have been a betrayal of my convictions based on experience. Some things you never forget and because the liberals have this belief hammered into their DNA about me and other conservatives, it is they who are the bigots.

Forty-eight years later almost to the day I went back to Lithuania for the first of many Atlantic crossings to come. My return had seemed beyond hope for nearly that long; landing in Vilnius that October day and walking its streets was like a delicate sweet dream where you don't want to wake up and return to reality. The Soviet Union had crumbled

upon itself in a pile of corruption and crime and not without leaving its evil mark of murder at the Vilnius television tower. Lithuania with its sister states of Latvia and Estonia were in bad shape economically. During my first visit there the Russians had placed an energy embargo, which resulted in no heat or hot water in homes and offices. In spirit, however, the people were energized, sensing the rebirth for their nation. They expressed their patriotism by flying the national colors and wearing them on their lapels. Songs of freedom and perseverance were heard on the radio while urging the remaining Russian troops a quick and sober trip home. No one doubted that the economy would improve and Lithuania would take its rightful place among the free nations. The week I spent traveling in the country and meeting people was consumed by my search of ideas of how I could fit in and help to achieve this goal.

The Telsiai Cathedral stood as it had for centuries when I pulled open its heavy wooden doors and went inside on that cold day in 1992. I was home! I had been away for nearly a half of a century and I was back! This was the center of the universe for generations of my ancestors who believed and worshipped the Creator and were certain of eternal afterlife in His arms. It was as if the Cathedral's walls were speaking to me, assuring me the truth of their beliefs, which neither science nor man without faith could alter or disprove. Beliefs in the sanctity of marriage between a man and a woman in order to have children and to nurture them, teaching them honesty, demonstrating charity by example and the value of work and study as a foundation for life. Beliefs in a higher power, which created the world and everything in it. Power that gave humans free will to choose between good and evil.

In the years that followed my first visit, I went back to Telsiai numerous times, mostly on Sundays. Regardless of

which city in Lithuania business required my presence and where I stayed, first in Panevezys, then Marijampole, Kaunas and Vilnius, I never failed to visit this church, climb the stairs to the second floor with the view of the main altar below, kneel and say thanks for the blessings to me and to my family.

One final footnote: The accidental shooting of the primer into my ankle on the Danube shore came to my attention again in 1957. I was in the U.S. Army and been wearing combat boots for a few months when I noticed swelling and irritation on my ankle caused by the boot rubbing the spot. It would not go away and I visited the post infirmary, where a newly minted Captain-doctor examined the ankle, applied a local anesthetic and with a scalpel removed the primer. He asked me how and when this took place and when I told him it was right after the war, he took a hard look at me and said: “Just exactly how old are you?”

END

Beginning with an incident described in the historical novel *The Crimson Blight*, this true story of one family's flight from Stalin's homicidal terror is recounted by the youngest member of that family. He recollects in rich detail the evil aftermath of the first Soviet occupation of Lithuania followed by the German takeover, the imminent return of Stalin's armies and the family's escape to Germany.

His story continues with life in Germany, which is facing defeat and destruction. The author experiences war's end firsthand and vividly describes his memories surrounding it. He narrates the family's settlement into a Lithuanian DP camp in U.S.-occupied Bavaria and continues with tales of schooling, his Boy Scout activities, concerns about emigration and the ever-present uncertainty about their future.



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